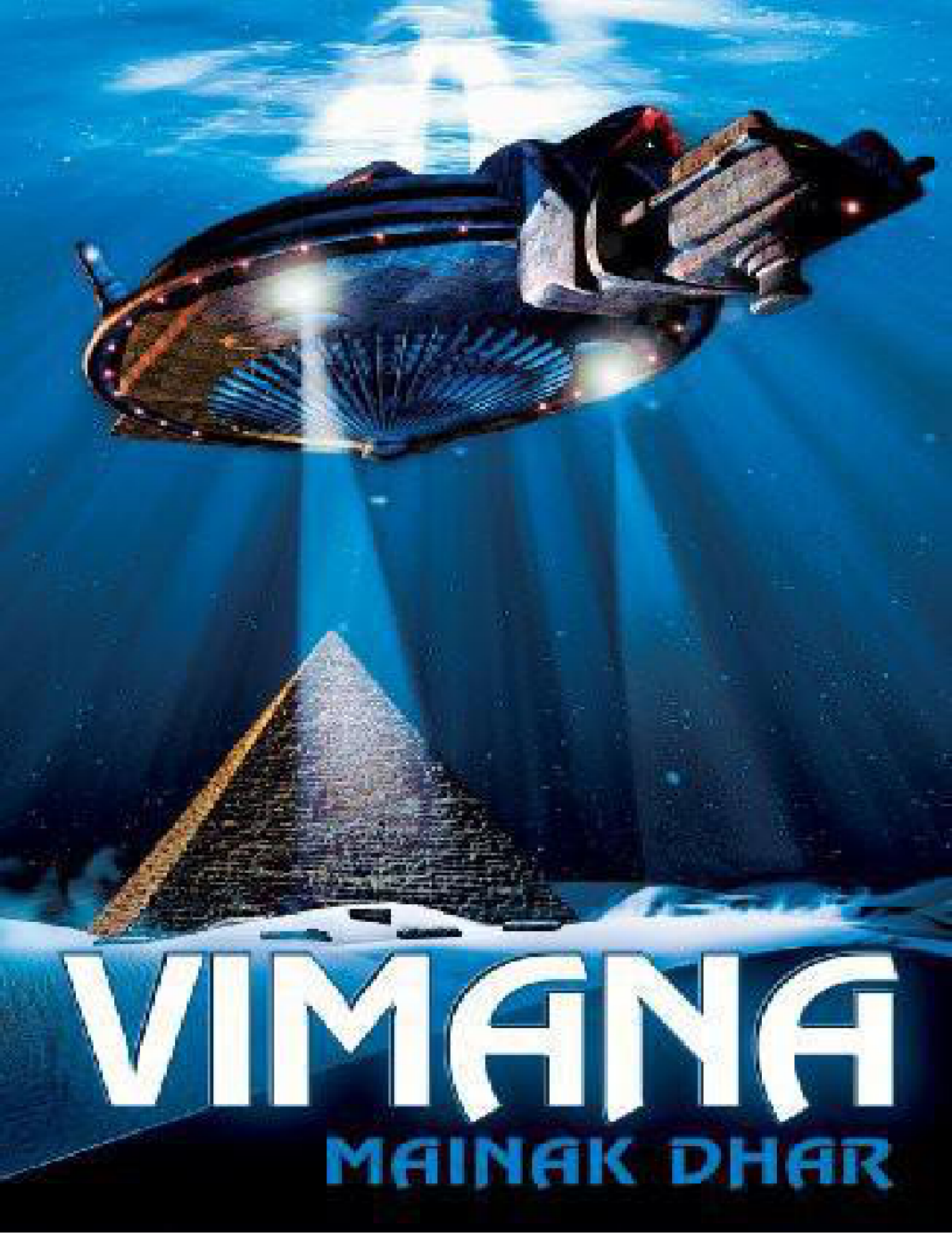
VIMANA
MAINAK DHAR

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Ancient texts refer to 'Gods' flying in craft called vimanas and waging war with what sound like nuclear weapons. These accounts are today classified as myth or legend. What if they turned out to be real? Vimana is an edge-of your seat sci-fi technothriller about a young college student who stumbles upon an ancient war between good and evil. A war that we thought was merely a part of our ancient myths and legends, but unknown to us, is still being waged everyday in our skies. As the forces of darkness conspire to unleash worldwide devastation to coincide with the End Times prophecies in 2012, he discovers his hidden destiny is to join the forces of light in bringing this war to a conclusion. At stake will be the continued existence of the human race. Star Wars meets Transformers in this exciting new thriller that will keep all science fiction fans satisfied.

- Mainak Dhar
- PROLOGUE
- ONE
- TWO
- THREE
- FOUR
- FIVE
- SIX
- SEVEN
- EIGHT
- NINE
- TEN
- ELEVEN
- TWELVE
- THIRTEEN
- FOURTEEN
- FIFTEEN
- SIXTEEN
- SEVENTEEN

Mainak Dhar
Vimana

As always,
For Puja & Aadi

PROLOGUE

Western India, 13000 BC

The old hunter cursed his son for the tenth time that day. He needed help to carry back the deer he had killed, and he wanted to get back to the relative safety of their group well before the sun retired for the night.

He smiled as he skinned the deer. He had brought this one down with a single arrow. He may be an old man now, but his eyes were still sharp. It was a pity that his arms did not have the same strength they did forty summers ago, otherwise he would not have had to depend on his lazy son to help him carry the deer back.

He soon saw the boy cresting the top of the hill and coming towards him. The child seemed to be excited.

'Father, do you know what I saw?'

'I know that you certainly didn't see any other animals to hunt. So, my observant son, what did you see?'

The boy sat down on his haunches next to his father, barely able to conceal his excitement.

'Father, today I saw three vimanas fly over the coast. You know what Kalindi has been saying, right? About the Gods fighting amongst themselves, about their war across the oceans?'

The man shook his head in disapproval at his son believing the words of that accursed wandering storyteller. He knew what it was to be young and to be excited by such fantastic tales, but he also knew he needed to focus on providing for his family, and not worry about what the Gods were doing.

'My son, the Gods have been around since before my forefathers were born. They have their own ways, their own lives, and we have ours. Now, help me gather the deer and carry it back. Or do you want to repeat what happened three moons ago?'

That brought a sudden flush of fear to the boy's face. He remembered only too well how another clan had attacked them and taken all their skins and meat. They had been lucky to escape alive. The boy was just twelve summers old, but he knew well that he lived in a world where life could be brutal, and short. He started to help his father pick up the deer when they heard loud crackling noises, like that of thunder. They both looked up. There was not a cloud in the sky and no signs that the Rain God was going to vent his fury on them. The father watched the sky for some time and then started to pick up his bow when they heard three more thunderous cracks.

This time, they saw what was causing the sound. High above them in the sky, where only the birds and Gods flew, they saw three vimanas streak by. Even at this distance, the father recognized the round shapes of the vimanas that Kalindi claimed were flown by the Dark Ones. One separated from the others and dived towards the ground, like a bird of prey diving for the kill. The hunter ran to the edge of the cliff, followed by his son.

They watched as a small object separated from the vimana and sped towards the ground, with smoke and fire trailing it. The hunter had heard of the Gods firing their divine flaming bolts, but this was the first time he had witnessed the awesome power of the Gods. He watched the object fly towards the ground, almost beyond the horizon, and then there was a mighty roar that was louder than anything the hunter had ever heard. He felt his son's hand clutch his in fear, but he had no reassurance to offer. He watched in mute horror as a giant fireball covered the horizon. He stared at the light that seemed brighter than the sun on the hottest day, and then looked away as the fireball seemed to expand. His son was screaming.

'Father, I am blind!'

The hunter felt strong gusts pummeling him and his son a few moments later and they were thrown to the ground. There seemed to be ash everywhere around them, and his skin was burning. When the hunter gathered courage to look up, he saw a gigantic pillar of smoke rising above him.

The Gods had indeed gone to war, and it seemed they were going to set the world on fire.

ONE

New Delhi, India, the present day

Aaditya Ghosh watched as the enemy surface-to-air missile tracked in on him. He estimated he was no more than a few seconds away from a fiery death.

As the smoke trail got closer and closer, he was tempted to turn his jet away, but he knew that keeping a cool head was the best way to evade the missile that was racing towards him. When the missile was just a few hundred metres away, he released some flares to distract it and then put his fighter through a punishing turn. For a second, he could see very little as the world spun around him. When he was level again, he breathed a sigh of relief. There was no sign of the missile. But the battle was far from over. He was cruising at thirty thousand feet when he picked up the first enemy jet on his radar. Fifty kilometres out and ten thousand feet below him. A quick glance at the top right hand corner of his display told him that the intruders were two F-16s. He messaged his wingmen to cover him and then swooped down to intercept the enemy planes. Having chosen a Su-35 for his mission, he knew that he would likely have an edge when it came to locking on and firing his long range missiles, but with two attackers and wingmen he was not sure he could count on to cover his back, it would be tight.

He slowed down to Mach 0.8 and armed his radar homing missiles as he watched the F-16s come closer on his radar scope. The two red dots were now barely thirty kilometres away, and Aaditya noted with some dismay that his wingmen, indicated by blue dots on his display, were not quite doing much to cover him. In theory, they were to operate as a team, but in reality, he knew that he was very much on his own.

At twenty-seven kilometres, Aaditya's radar emitted a whistling tone that indicated that he had locked in on the first F-16. He waited for the triangle to appear over the enemy jet on his Heads Up Display that indicated he had a solid lock before he fired a missile. A second later, he fired another. It was a bit of an overkill, but he was carrying a huge load of missiles, and he had long learnt that rankings and honours were conferred based on the number of kills, not on efficiency. He watched both missiles streak across the sky towards their quarry as he switched focus to the next enemy. The range was now less than twenty kilometres and he watched as the enemy jet fired a missile at him. The red arrow shape rapidly approached on his

radar display, and Aaditya reacted with no trace of panic or alarm, his reactions honed by countless hours of practice. He deployed some chaff strips to confuse the enemy radar guided missiles and put his jet through a series of punishing 9G turns. When he had stabilized, the enemy missiles were nowhere to be seen, and the first enemy jet had disappeared off his scope, having been obliterated by one of his missiles.

Without waiting to celebrate his kill, Aaditya selected his short-ranged heat-seeking missiles and turned towards the second F-16. He accelerated to over Mach 1 and at a range of less than ten kilometres, he fired two missiles at the F-16.

That was when his mission was ended abruptly by a tap on the shoulder.

'Dude, Donkey's coming this way.'

Aaditya quickly slid the PSP into his backpack as Professor D.K. Kumar, known with much mirth and little affection among his students as Donkey, walked over to his desk.

'Mr Ghosh, you seem to be preoccupied today. Perhaps you could tell the class a little more about the impact the colonial system had on the Indian economy.'

Aaditya looked at the Professor, a smile on his face, as if he were about to answer. In reality, his mind was blank. Blasting enemy fighters while playing Ace Combat 6 on his PSP was about all he could remember of his Economic History class. He kept looking at the professor, hoping he would find a new prey, but he persisted. Then someone coughed, a few notebooks were slammed shut, and Aaditya found himself being rescued by the fact that the period was over. He heaved a sigh of relief and looked at Samrat, who was sitting behind him.

'Sam, thanks for the heads up.'

Samrat smiled, but behind his eager, bespectacled eyes, Aaditya could detect a trace of disapproval. Oh well, everyone could not be a bookworm like Samrat. Aaditya was about to leave the class when the professor called him over. Fearing that he was in for a lecture, Aaditya braced himself, only to be shocked when the overweight, balding professor smiled at him.

'Play your video games all you want, just not in my class.'

Shit, he knew.

Aaditya wondered what he could possibly say in his defence when the professor continued, this time his smile taking on a sad tinge.

'I know it must be difficult for you. The principal had told us, but do try and adjust and let me know if I can help in any way.'

Aaditya mumbled his thanks and left, but was fuming inside. The last thing he wanted from anyone was sympathy. He barely noticed

Samrat walk up next to him.

'Hey, what happened? Did you get into trouble?'

Aaditya looked down at Samrat who stood a good head shorter than him and was about half as wide across his shoulders. Aaditya figured that his imposing build was at least one reason why Samrat, long rumoured to be the small nerd everyone picked on, had befriended him when he joined his class. They wandered over to the basketball court where several boys were in the middle of a frenetic game. They sat down near the court, Aaditya wistfully looking on. When the ball bounced over to them, he picked it up and was about to hand it back, when an urge came over him. He looked at the basket and sent a looping shot that went cleanly through. Several of the boys on the court whistled and one of them asked Aaditya if he wanted to join them. But Aaditya mumbled an excuse and rejoined Samrat, a smile on his face.

For old times' sake.

'Man! That was some shot. Were you in your school team or something?'

'It's nothing. Come on, let's go grab a bite to eat.'

They sat down at a corner table at the cafeteria, eating their sandwiches when they were joined by another boy.

'Hey Sam. Hey Ghosh.'

The newcomer was Deepak, thin and wiry, with his customary iPod earphones plugged into his ears.

'Hey iPod.'

Samrat's nickname for him never failed to annoy Deepak. He grimaced and sat down. If Samrat was the bookworm, the word for Deepak, not to put too delicate a point on it, would be a lech. The unlikely couple were the best of friends, and in the two months that Aaditya had been in the college, they had become the closest things to friends he had in his new home.

Deepak immediately began scanning the cafeteria for likely objects of his attention. Aaditya heard him whisper, 'She's looking at me!'

The 'she' referred to Surpiya, resident heartthrob of most boys. Supriya of the long legs. Supriya of the impish smile. Supriya of the cute accent. And also, Supriya of the impossibly rich father and expensive tastes. That was a combination which put her firmly out of the league of her many admirers.

'In your dreams, iPod. She's looking at our own Mister Tall, Dark and Handsome here', said Samrat, gesturing towards Aaditya. Embarrassed, Aaditya tried to change the topic. The last thing he wanted to do was flirt with some girl in college. But then when Samrat nudged Aaditya again, he couldn't resist looking at the three

girls sitting about a dozen feet away. Supriya was sipping a cup of coffee, but over the rim of the cup, she was definitely looking at him. Aaditya stared right back. Their eyes locked for a few seconds, then she turned away. Aaditya smiled to himself. Flirting was almost the last thing on his mind, but certainly not at the absolute bottom of the list. As on the basketball court, memories came flooding back. Memories he did not want to deal with right now. Standing well over six feet tall, with the physique of an athlete, he had always had more than his fair share of female admirers in school. The one thing he hated with a vengeance about his appearance, his mop of unruly hair, somehow seemed to only enhance his appeal, and so over time, he had learnt to make peace with the fact that he could never keep his hair in place.

But that had been seemingly a different life. He had never imagined then that he would be studying Economics at a Delhi college, with not the foggiest idea of what he was going to do with his degree, if indeed he finally managed to get one. Life back then had seemed so certain, so simple. But now he knew, just when you thought you had things totally under control, life threw you a curveball you couldn't possibly have anticipated.

'Dude, you lost in thinking about her or what? Come on, we need to hurry otherwise we'll be late for Macro class again. I do hope you've done your assignment.'

Just a few months earlier, Aaditya would have laughed at the thought of rushing from class to class, being harangued for not doing homework. No, his place was in the sky, soaring above mere mortals, kissing the clouds. The only uniform that he had considered worthy of wearing was that of a fighter pilot, the only worthy assignment being a sortie with a fighter jet at his command. But for now, he would have to settle for not being chewed up by the professor for not having bothered to read up about the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy.

***

Aaditya was still thanking his stars that the professor had not picked on him and did not notice Supriya standing in the corridor till he almost bumped into her.

'Hi. Aaditya, isn't it?'

Aaditya had never seen her this close before, and he quickly saw that both her reputation and her legion of admirers were well deserved.

'Hi. My friends call me Aadi, and you must be the Supriya half the college tries to impress.'

'Only half?' she said, jokingly.

'I was referring to the half that is made up of every boy in college.'

She smiled, and Aaditya could sense Samrat shuffling behind him.

'Supriya, this is Sam. He's in my class.'

'You're the one who came first or something, right? I've heard of you, Sam.'

Aaditya was beginning to wonder what Supriya wanted with him when two more girls joined them.

'Aadi, this is Anu and this is Suchi. Girls, this is Aaditya. I guess you've just been here for a couple of months, right?'

Aaditya nodded and smiled at the two girls as Supriya continued.

'Hey, we were going to grab some coffee. I figured since you're new in college, you may want to join us and get to meet some of the gang.'

Aaditya was thinking of what to say when he heard Samrat hissing in his ear, 'Say yes, you moron.'

Ten minutes later, they were in front of a nearby coffee shop and as they entered, Aaditya looked at Samrat and Deepak. Both had wide grins plastered on their faces.

'Sam, you look like you've won a lottery.'

'Dude, she knows who I am!'

Deepak scowled and playfully punched Samrat on the shoulder. 'Dork'.

When they entered and joined Supriya and her friends, Aaditya saw Sam and Deepak's expressions change to one of dismay. He realized that his friends had perhaps imagined this to be a date with Supriya and her friends. Instead there were four boys already with the girls.

Samrat and Deepak had been planning all through the short walk to the café how they would be at their charming and witty best. They had no idea of just how much their new friend could turn on the charm. Having grown up among officers and gentlemen, Aaditya knew well how to charm the pants off someone. Right from the time he stood up to pull the chairs back so the ladies could sit, to the way he ensured the waitress got the girls' orders before he asked the others. When Supriya heard of Aaditya's background, she leaned over and smiled.

'An Air Force kid. I should have figured. Most guys are not so chivalrous nowadays.'

When Anu asked if the gang would like to meet up later in the evening to go dancing, Supriya enthusiastically agreed, and before Aaditya knew it, plans had been made to go to a disco.

Sam caught the look on Aaditya's face, and was about to say

something but Aaditya motioned for him to stop. 'I have a long day tomorrow, so sorry to be a spoilsport, but I need to get home early guys.'

Supriya protested, but as much as Aaditya wanted to spend more time with her, he did not want to tell her why he could not go dancing, and he most certainly did not want the pity and platitudes that he knew would be forthcoming if he did tell her the real reason. Perhaps on any other day, he would have tagged along, but tonight he was in no mood to be reminded of his shortcomings. So he excused himself and said that he could not join them.

When they walked out, Samrat caught up with him. 'Man, you should have come along. It's no big deal.'

Aaditya stopped and looked at him.

'That's easy for you to say.'

Samrat looked at him apologetically. 'Sorry, dude, you know that's not what I meant. Look, screw them. Why don't you me and iPod meet up at my place? I've got the new Medal of Honor on my PS3, and we can go and blow up some Taliban.'

Aaditya smiled. So far only Samrat and Deepak had learnt his full story, and he was beginning to realize that for all the things that had gone wrong over the last few months, he had at least been lucky to get a couple of really good guys as friends.

'That sounds like a plan.'

***

Aaditya returned to his apartment just after ten o clock. On balance it had been a fun evening. They had played on Sam's PS3 for a couple of hours, and then Sam's parents had joined them for dinner. His father had asked the boys what they planned to do after college. Samrat had already decided on an MBA, or rather, Aaditya thought, his father had decided that for him. And so, even though they were only in first year, Sam was going to join tutorials next year to prepare him for the MBA admission tests. Deepak was nowhere as certain of what he wanted to do, but given that every second person in their class was planning to try for an MBA, he replied with a shrug of his shoulder that he guessed he was also going to join Sam for his classes.

Then came Aaditya's turn, and when he answered that he really did not know what he wanted to do, he almost heard an audible gasp from Sam's father. The awkwardness was defused by Sam's mother wheeling in the dessert. As Aaditya listened to Sam's father talk about how important it was to have a plan for life, he thought how different his life may have been if he had been able to follow his plan. And it wasn't just his career. He wanted to meet someone like Supriya

without cringing at the pity that he knew was inevitable when she got to know him better.

Back home he sat down on the sofa in his living room and turned on the television. He willed himself to not think too much about the things he didn't have.

Please don't go into a self-pity trip again. We've been there before and it is not a pretty place.

When he realized that there was little else on offer other than the usual soaps, he turned it off and got up to change. As he passed the side table outside his bedroom, he paused to look down at the photo frames on it.

For most people, photographs are a way of preserving memories. A way of freezing in time moments that have passed. For Aaditya, they served an additional purpose-they acted as a constant reminder of the life he could have had if only a couple of things had turned out differently.

There were a few photographs of Aaditya and his father. The elder Ghosh was as tall as Aaditya, and Aaditya remembered his earliest memories being that of looking up into his father's smiling face. There were a couple of photos of his father with his mother, but honestly Aaditya remembered nothing of her. The woman who had given birth to him was no better than a stranger, having shared less than three hours with him in this world. She had died soon after giving birth to him.

He showered and changed, but before keeping his clothes in the washing pile, he remembered to take out his good luck charm from his pocket. He ran his hands over the raised edges of the round, embroidered patch of cloth. He felt the outline of the Hawk, soaring, its talons bared, two crisscrossing lightning bolts below it. And then just four words embroidered underneath.

No return without conquest.

The words mocked him now. There certainly had been no return. Not that evening. Not ever since.

He put his father's old squadron patch on his bedside table and then booted up his computer. The wallpaper on his computer desktop was a collage of photos-all showing his father in uniform. Most of them had Aaditya standing beside him, and most showed them next to fighter planes. Aaditya smiled as he saw one photo of him and his father in the cockpit of a Sukhoi 30. He had sat in the back seat, devouring every detail, imagining what a joy it must be to fly such a beast every day for a living. Then there was a photo of him receiving the Silver medal in the National Cadet Corps Flying Wing. His father stood a few feet away, pride apparent in his eyes.

Growing up among fighter planes and pilots, there had never

been any real question of what Aaditya would do when he grew up. It wasn't that his father had ever pushed him to follow in his footsteps, but for as long as he could remember, Aaditya had only one dream-to be a fighter pilot. Growing up in various airbases, surrounded by pilots, the dream of flying a fighter jet had long come to define his life. He had done everything he needed to do to make that dream come true-join the NCC, fly as much as he could-often accumulating more hours in the NCC Flying Wing's gliders and light planes than many active duty pilots did, and keeping himself fit through sports and martial arts. It had seemed like a no-brainer for him to join the National Defence Academy straight out of school, and then make his dream come true by joining the Indian Air Force.

But ultimately none of that had mattered. And here he was, with little left to show for the life he had once dreamed of other than a collection of old photos, and the squadron patch he kept with him at all times. In the drawer of his bedside table was the letter that had changed his life.

We regret to inform you that Squadron Leader Mayukh Ghosh…

For three days after his father's jet had gone missing during an exercise over the Arabian Sea, Aaditya had kept his hopes alive. His father's squadron mates and their families had closed ranks around him, ensuring he was never alone, that the seventeen year old boy had food, that the motherless boy whom they had collectively adopted as their own never felt abandoned in this moment of need. Aaditya had then truly appreciated what his father had told him about the Air Force being one big family, and he was grateful for all the support he had got. But none of that could change the fact that his father was not going to come back home again. After three days of frantic searching in shark-infested waters, and with even the wreckage not recovered in the deep seas, Squadron Leader Mayukh Ghosh had been given up as lost.

In one stroke, Aaditya's life had been turned upside down. His father had perhaps always known, with the instinct of a career fighter pilot, that one day it might come to this. And so, he had prepared meticulously-the apartment was in Aaditya's name, the family inheritances were invested in fixed deposits in Aaditya's name, and a list of contacts had been kept ready, including a good friend in Delhi who had helped Aaditya get into college and into his new life. His father, Aaditya thought, even in death, had proved to be the best father in the world. It was he who had thrown away all the dreams.

He didn't want to think about the past, but perhaps today, there was no way he could avoid it. If his father had still been with him, tomorrow would have been his birthday. When Aaditya was growing up, an Air Force officer's salary had not been enough to get

extravagant gifts, but his father had always made sure that Aaditya never felt the absence of a mother. Every birthday was magnified into a memorable event, including that one unforgettable time when, on Aaditya's birthday, his father had allowed him to sit in the back seat of a Sukhoi. Aaditya wished that his father had been with him so that he too could have done something to make the day special for him.

But while Aaditya had not been able to follow his dreams, he could still live them vicariously. So, for the next hour, he expounded on the relative merits of the various contenders for the Air Force's new fighter contract on an online forum where he had long come to be recognized as the resident expert when it came to anything to do with fighter aircraft. He then logged onto his favorite air combat sim and flew a mission where he obliterated an enemy nuclear plant and shot down a handful of fighters, once again firmly establishing himself at the top of the leaderboard, and more than making up for the afternoon's aborted mission.

At midnight, Aaditya lay down on his bed..

Tonight was a time to remember all the good times he had shared with his father. As he drifted off to sleep, he whispered to himself, *'Happy birthday, Dad.*'

He dreamt of flying a Sukhoi, streaking through the skies at supersonic speed, worldly worries left thousands of feet below. But for a change, he did not dream of flying alone. In the back seat was his father.

TWO

Aaditya barely made it in time for his first class the next morning. He had woken up late, and had then decided to ride his bike to college. He had bought his bike just a month ago, and was still getting used to it. At the time, it had seemed like a bright idea, but now that he was faced with the practicalities of kick-starting it, he was yet to work out a routine that did not leave him looking like a circus acrobat, or gasping in pain as he put pressure on his right leg.

Transfemoral prosthesis. Trust the doctors to come with such a fancy word to describe chopping off your leg and sticking an artificial and inconvenient contraption in its place. As Aaditya entered his class, he reminded himself that he should not really be blaming the doctors for chopping off his leg-he had been the one responsible for that. And as for the contraption he now had attached below his right thigh, it may not be a real leg, but it sure beat hobbling along on one foot and carrying crutches, as he had done for the first three months after the accident. More than a year later, when he walked, nobody could tell that he had an artificial leg. That was of course, unless they wanted to see him in shorts or, indeed, go dancing. The onelegged hop-now that would be a sure way to impress Supriya, wouldn't it?

'You seem to be in a good mood. So, did you catch up with Supriya later at night?' As Aaditya sat down at his desk he just gave a look of sheer exasperation at Sam's comment. Sam reached over and whispered into Aaditya's ear. 'Take it from someone who's neither older, nor much wiser, but you need to stop thinking of what you don't have and think of what you do have. Come on, man, — short of casting you in a bloody fairness cream ad, I don't know what else I can do to convince you that the girls have their eyes on you.'

Aaditya grinned. Trust Sam to break the ice like that.

After classes, Aaditya had been invited for tea to Wing Commander Asthana's house. The Wing Commander had been a batchmate of his father's and had helped Aaditya settle down in Delhi when he had moved here from Pune after his accident, both for his treatment and also to move into the apartment his father had left for him. Aaditya always felt a bit uncomfortable meeting Dad's former colleagues. They brought back memories of the life he had left behind, and even if he was imagining it, he always thought their eyes reflected the unasked question of how he could have thrown it all away.

An hour later, Aaditya was on his bike, riding home. While he had not shown much interest to Sam, he had already taken Supriya's number. He may be missing a leg, and he certainly did not want any

woman to go out with him out of pity, but he retained enough sense to know that he would be a fool to not call Supriya again. She was a looker for sure, but more importantly, he had really been comfortable with her, so there was really no harm in going out with her and seeing where things went from there.

His bike was almost halfway home, threading through the dense traffic near the Delhi Zoo, before getting on to the bridge across the Yamuna and then on to Mayur Vihar in the suburbs, where his apartment was. Suddenly, he saw a bus careen towards him from the opposite direction. The bus driver was either drunk, or didn't know how to drive, or both, because he was weaving in and out of his lane. At the last minute, Aaditya swerved his bike to avoid the bus.

'Bastard!' Aaditya screamed over his shoulder as he continued home. He tried to think what he'd say to Supriya when he called her, but the bus bearing down at him had brought back other, painful memories.

BK or AK?

That mystifying question had been the first words he had heard when he had awakened to find himself on a hospital bed. The day after the search for his father had been called off, he had pleaded with the authorities to keep looking. Perhaps his father had just drifted away. Perhaps he was unconscious and had not seen or heard any of the helicopters. The officer in charge of the search, a man who had known Aaditya since he had been in diapers, had looked to be on the verge of tears, but said that there was nothing more to be done. Aaditya should have known better, but he had been only seventeen, and had just lost the only family he had ever known. So he had helped himself to his father's stash of Scotch, and then screaming out his rage at the unfairness of it all, had gone roaring down the highway on his bike.

By the time he saw the bus, it had been too late.

BK or AK? Below the knee or above the knee? That was what the doctor had been asking, Aaditya realized later. There is perhaps no good way to lose a leg, but as Aaditya was to learn, if you do lose one, pray it's BK. An amputation above the knee makes recovery much tougher. The Air Force had paid for the best care available, and he had been fitted with a state of the art prosthetic leg, but the doctor told him, with an amputation above the knee, the average patient needed 80 per cent more strength to carry himself along than a normal person. Aaditya had beaten those odds, turning to the gym with a frenzy, building his already strong physique into solid muscle, but he had not been so lucky when, after six months, he had worked up the courage to ask his father's Commanding Officer whether he still had a chance to be a fighter pilot.

Chopra uncle, as Aaditya had known him for most of his life, had looked up Aaditya nearly every day since his father had been lost. Now he told Aaditya that he could certainly still join the Air Force, provided he could pass the fitness tests. That had been the good news. The bad news was that the doctors had recommended that even if he were to be accepted into the Air Force, it should be ideally for ground duties, since they were not sure his leg could take the strain of flying. At best he could be allowed to pilot helicopters, but fast jets were out. The strains of pulling high G forces could be dangerous, and if he ever had to use an ejection seat, his leg would never be able to withstand the force.

Aaditya had wondered if he had made the right decision in giving up on joining the Air Force. He knew the answer. No matter how much he regretted not joining the Air Force, working in it every day, next to fighters and fighter pilots, yet knowing he could never be one of them was far worse than being in a world removed from it all.

Still rattled by the near accident and by the memories it had brought back, he stopped his bike near the Old Fort, wanting to grab some fresh air and clear his head. And perhaps call Supriya.

It was now almost nine at night. Till a few hours back the grounds had been full of families strolling or taking a ride in the boats on the small lake in front of the fort. Now it was totally deserted. There were a few food stalls open outside the front gates, and he picked up some chips, and munching on them, walked towards the lake. Lost in thought, after a while he realized just how far he had ventured when he turned to see the traffic in the distance behind him, their lights dimly lighting up the darkness. Oh well, he was in no hurry to go anywhere. The cool October weather in Delhi was perfect, so he walked some more and entered the main fort premises, walking through the ruins till he found a secluded spot near a large tree that was just a few metres away from the lake. He sat down there to call Supriya.

She picked up on the third ring.

'Hey Supriya, it's Aadi here.'

'Hey there! So did you decide to make up for ditching me last night?'

Aaditya smiled. Good looking and nice. They did still make girls that way.

'Here's a deal, don't ask me to dance, and if you're free tomorrow, I'll treat you to dinner any place you like.'

A brave offer since he had heard she came from a pretty rich family, but he hoped that she would not ask for the Taj. And if she did, what the hell, Aaditya was feeling happy and reckless enough.

Before she could answer, someone stumbled into Aaditya, sending

his phone flying on to the grass.

'What the…'

Before he could complete his sentence, he looked up to see a very large man, dressed in black. Aaditya could not make out many of his features, except that the face was black as the night. Figuring that this did not look like the kind of man to get into a tangle with and not wanting any trouble, he got up and moved out of the man's way to pick up his phone.

That was when he heard the scream.

***

The scream that pierced the night was high-pitched and shrill, but the moaning that followed left no doubt that it was from a person in utter agony. The man who had just bumped into Aaditya raced towards the sound, moving at a speed faster than Aaditya would have believed someone his size capable of.

Probably some gang related violence.

Not wanting to get caught up in it, Aaditya started to turn towards the lake and make his way back to the gate, which was a few hundred metres away. That was when he saw a struggle in the distance. He could not see too many details in the dark, but what was obvious was that a large figure, likely the man who had just bumped into him, was grappling with a much smaller person. The long hair made it obvious that she was a woman.

Aaditya never liked getting into fights. *Always more trouble than they're worth*, his father used to say. *Walk away if all you're fighting for is your ego. Defuse the situation if you can, and only fight if you're left with no option.*

Walking away was not an option, not when it looked like there was a woman in trouble. However, Aaditya had every intention of settling this with little or no fighting. He figured it was a local goon who was taking advantage of the darkness and the secluded location to get frisky with a woman. Most likely he would just scoot when he saw that there was someone else there.

Aaditya rushed towards them. With his leg, he could no longer sprint like he once did in school, but he moved as fast as he could. When he was closer, he saw a man sprawled on the ground, but the other man and the woman were still locked in a struggle.

'Let her go!' He screamed at the top of his voice, and the man turned to look at him. Aaditya was now close enough to see the man more clearly. He was huge, at least a few inches taller than Aaditya and much broader across the chest and shoulders. His forehead seemed to have a prominent ridge above the eyebrows. As Aaditya

paused, wondering what that could be, the woman struck.

She was small, perhaps no more than five feet six inches and thin, almost waiflike, but she struck with a speed and precision that shocked Aaditya. Her hand snaked out and hit the large man on the neck, sending him down in a heap, grabbing at his neck and gurgling in agony.

Aaditya stopped in his tracks.

What the hell had he got into?

The woman looked at him for an instant, and he could now see her long, flowing hair, cascading down to her waist. She was wearing a fitting white suit, similar to what divers wore. But what struck him the most was her face. Her eyes were blazing as if on fire, and she had a dark red smear running down the middle of her forehead. Even though she was much smaller than him, Aaditya felt truly afraid as her eyes bore through him.

He was about to back off, when four more men suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. They looked to be carbon copies of the one the woman had already dispatched-large, well built, and dressed in black. Two of them took out curved blades and lunged at the woman. Aaditya wasn't sure what to do, the woman certainly looked like she could take care of herself, yet he didn't want to just walk away, leaving her facing these four new attackers. His choice was made for him when one of the men saw him and rushed at him.

Aaditya was in great physical shape, having been an athlete for most of his school years, and had a Brown Belt in Karate to boot. As his attacker came closer and reached out to grab Aaditya, he side-stepped, took the man's wrist, and using the larger man's momentum against him, sent him sprawling to the ground. Aaditya turned to see that the woman had sent one attacker down, but was now trading blows with her other attacker, a blade in her own hand. The two of them moved in a deadly rhythm, circling each other, looking for an opening, striking and blocking with lightning speed. Aaditya would have kept watching, but he now had big problems of his own. Two big problems.

Two men, including the one he had sent down, were now running towards him. As tough as he thought he was, he wasn't sure he could take on both of these giants, and not having any way of backing off now, he decided to use surprise to his advantage and struck first. His feet couldn't move as fast as they once could, and he certainly was limited in his ability to kick, but he moved towards the nearer man, and landed a series of two quick punches-one to the solar plexus that winded the big man, and as he doubled over, a second blow to the temple that sent the man staggering back. Aaditya had put most of his strength into the blows and was shocked when the man stood up a

split second later and grinned at him, baring a mouth full of yellowed and deformed teeth.

Now I'm in deep shit.

The second man struck out at Aaditya with a punch. He saw it coming and blocked it, his right hand coming down in an arc to deflect the momentum of the man's blow, and followed through with a kick to the shin. The blow jarred Aaditya's right leg and sent pain shooting through his body, but the metal and carbon fibre artificial leg did much more damage than his real leg would ever have. The man grabbed his shin and staggered down on one knee. Before Aaditya could do anything else, total pandemonium erupted around him.

He felt a gust of wind blow around him, and sand being blown across his face, before he heard the humming noise behind him. It was no louder than a vacuum cleaner, but when he turned to look, he saw a large flying vehicle land just next to the lake. He could not make out too many details in the dark, but it was easily as large as a fighter jet, and seemed to be white in colour. It had a raised canopy, and a nose that was split and curved upwards, like a bull's horns. As the vehicle landed on the sand, the canopy slid open, and a man jumped out.

He was tall, perhaps as tall as the four men in black Aaditya and the woman had been grappling with, but while they looked like gym-buffed bodybuilders, this man was all lean muscle. He wore a striped bodysuit, and as he came closer, Aaditya thought they looked like tiger stripes. His hair was matted, almost in dreadlocks and he carried what looked like a small trident in his hand.

If the woman had looked like she could dish out violence, this newcomer took it to a whole new level. He rolled on the ground, evading a blow from one attacker and casually slashed him in the back with the trident, sending him down, and even before he had fully gotten up from the roll, he had implanted the trident in another man's stomach. In no more than a couple of seconds, he had killed or maimed two of the giants, and stood facing the remaining two, a smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

'Want to dance, dear daityas?'

The two men rushed at him, blades glistening in the dark. The woman intercepted one, sliding on the ground, her legs wrapping around his, sending him down as she gracefully rolled on to one knee, and brought her blade down in one smooth move. When Aaditya looked up, he saw that the last man in black was also down, lying at the feet of the man with matted hair. He felt a surge of panic as the man walked towards him now, bloodied trident in hand, but the woman came between them, gently shaking her head. The two of them entered the flying vehicle and in an instant, it had taken off and disappeared from view.

Aaditya moved to a corner of the grounds and slumped behind a fallen oak tree. Getting into the odd scrape in school was one thing. The violence he had witnessed was of a totally different nature. Sitting there among six dead or dying men, he fumbled for his phone, wondering if he should call the police.

What would he tell them? How could he explain what he had just witnessed? That was when he saw the glowing cylinder lying a few feet away from him. He picked it up gingerly and was about to take a closer look when he heard another flying vehicle approach. It was a different ship, black in colour and shaped like a saucer. One of the men writhing on the ground seemed to be in contact with the pilot and said, presumably into some communication system, 'They got away. We need help.'

If help was what they were looking for, they did not get it. Some sort of beam flashed from the ship, and one by one, the men lying on the ground were incinerated, reduced to ash in an instant.

Aaditya lay hiding behind the tree, not daring to breathe. When he heard the sound of the ship receding, and got up to see a clear sky, he ran faster than he had in years to his bike and sped home.

***

Aaditya breathed freely only when he was back home. He saw on his phone that he had four missed calls from Supriya, but she was the last thing on his mind right now. He went into the bathroom, standing under the shower for what seemed to be an eternity, trying to calm himself down and to come to grips with what he had just seen. It was clearly not a gang fight, gangs did not arrive on the scene in flying vehicles. What the hell had he seen? He changed and dumped his dust-covered clothes, remembering to take out the old squadron patch.

That was when he saw the cylinder in his trouser pocket. He had totally forgotten about it in the chaos, and now he took a closer look. It was perhaps eight inches long and an inch in diameter. It was totally transparent, and what was most striking was the viscous liquid it contained. Milky white and thick, the liquid occupied about half of the cylinder. Aaditya put it on his bedside table, figuring that whatever the cylinder was, it was by no means the weirdest thing he had witnessed tonight.

Aaditya had all but given up drinking after his accident, but now he felt like he needed a stiff drink. Not having anything stronger than Coke at home, he poured himself a large glass of that and downed it in one gulp. When he put the glass down, he saw that his hands were shaking badly. He sat down on the sofa, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. His arms hurt from the fight, and his right leg was in a

world of pain from the kick he had delivered. He had already decided that he was not going to call the police, figuring that he wasn't even sure what he would report.

He called Sam, and then disconnected before the call was answered. What would he tell? He realized that the best way was to just move on, to not get involved any further in whatever had happened that night. And he knew of only one way of truly taking his mind off things.

He walked to his study table, and booted up his computer. Then he bent down, detached the prosthetic leg and put it beside him, rubbing the sore stump.

He put in his favorite flight sim, and then logged on to multiplayer mode using his handle *IndianBader*.

Only a few people got it, but it was a name Aaditya loved. His handle had been inspired by Douglas Bader, a Royal Air Force pilot who had lost both his legs in an accident, and then with two prosthetic legs, had gone on to be one of the most decorated fighter aces in the Second World War. Aaditya would not get a chance to emulate him in real life, but here, in his virtual playground, he ruled the skies. Part of it was sheer practice, since he had been playing for years, but part of it was what his father had told him. Some fighter pilots just had it. Call it instinct, call it luck-the ability to sense what to do a split second before others. A split second difference that often spelt the difference between life and death. After half an hour of flying and a half dozen air battles won, IndianBader had once again topped the leaderboards, and Aaditya took a break to grab another drink. He lost count of how many sorties he took off on, but reckoned it was at least one too many, and that it was already way past his usual bedtime. While that meant he would have a terrible time waking up in time for college the next morning, at least it helped him forget what he had just been through.

Almost.

When he got back to his computer and logged on to one of his favorite aviation forums, as luck would have had it, the most recent discussion thread was about aircraft that had gone missing while chasing UFOs. The last post read, 'Hey X-Files freaks, there are no UFOs, so just get back to reality.'

When he woke up in the morning, he would blame the stress he had been under, but maybe he just needed to unburden himself, and so he had posted a message in reply. It said: *I don't know about UFOs or aliens, but there are flying vehicles whose origin we cannot be sure of. I know because I saw two of them tonight. And I know these were not meteors or military planes, since I saw them from less than fifty feet away. I've grown up around fighters, and as I've been on this forum for years*

now, you guys know by now that I don't bullshit. And what I saw tonight was no military jet we know of.

He of course left out any mention of the fighting or the dead bodies, but went on to describe the first vehicle. He then logged off and went to bed.

The next morning Aaditya woke up with a bad headache and wondered if it had all been a terrible dream. Unable to contain his curiosity, he booted up his computer, knowing he would be late for college again. He wanted to check what others had made of his comments on the forum. When he logged on, he saw that his post had disappeared, and if anyone had responded to it, there was no sign of it either. He was secretly relieved. He had written the comment when he had been very freaked out. Now in the sober reality of day, he was glad people would not see his ravings about UFOs and write him off as another alien-chasing nutcase.

The morning went by in a blur of lectures and classes, and for once, he was glad to be in college. Sometimes being too busy to worry about things was good. Of course, there was one piece of unfinished business he had not forgotten about. He had not seen Supriya around all day, and so he called her just after noon, wondering if she would ever know what a supreme sacrifice he was making in giving up his gaming time to talk to her.

She did not answer, and Aaditya wondered if she was pissed with him. He couldn't blame her. From her standpoint, he had hung up on her mid-conversation and then not bothered to call her or answer her calls and messages.

Figuring out that she was either too busy or too pissed off to talk to him, Aaditya whipped out his PSP and was soon lost in a sortie. He had just evaded a missile and shot down two fighters and was on the tail of the bomber, downing which was the chief objective of this particular mission, when he was interrupted by a tap on the shoulder.

'Sam, I had the frigging bomber in my sights, man!'

He heard a cough followed by a voice that most decidedly did not belong to Sam.

'I'm sorry to have interrupted your sortie, Mr Ghosh, but I did want to meet you urgently.'

Aaditya whirled around to find himself face to face with the principal, Dr Bakshi.

Oh shit! First he was caught gaming in class and now he had just sworn at the principal. Could things get any worse? Dr Bakshi sat down next to Aaditya at the foot of the stairs overlooking the basketball court. Actually, Aaditya was a bit relieved that it was in fact the principal and not Donkey or one of his other professors. Dr Bakshi was known to be quite chilled out, and thought nothing of

hanging out with his students to get to know what was on their minds. What he said next though totally stumped Aaditya.

'You, Mr Ghosh, are a man of hidden talents.'

Aaditya had no idea what he was talking about. The principal must have thought he was being modest.

'Don't worry, it's great to show initiative like this, and if you have connections that you can use to get us such major sponsors for our college festival, we'd be only too happy to oblige.'

Aaditya was getting more and more confused and alarmed that there had been some misunderstanding.

'Dr Bakshi, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, and if something has gone wrong, it's not something I meant to do.'

Now it was the principal's turn to look baffled.

'I assumed you knew the guy since he came in saying his company was willing to put down such a large sponsorship because you had approached them.'

'Which guy?'

Now Dr Bakshi told him that he had got a call that morning from someone claiming to be Vice President, Corporate Communications for a firm called DSI.

'DSI? Never heard of them.'

The principal scratched his head, realizing that what he had thought was an easy new source of sponsorship was now getting more complicated.

'I hadn't either, but then he told me that they are a privately held conglomerate, with interests in many industries. I checked their website and it seemed very impressive. He said that they wanted to sponsor our college festival, including refurbishing the auditorium. All they wanted was some promotional activity and branding in college, which was obviously cool with me.'

So far, it did not sound very unusual. Aaditya knew that when festival season came around, the college would be canvassing for such sponsors. The unusual thing was where he fit into all this.

'Its great we have a new sponsor, but what does it have to do with me?'

'He mentioned that he wanted to meet only you. He asked for you by name and said that he wanted to thank you. That's why I assumed you knew him or something.'

'Sir, I have never heard of the company before, but what did he say his name was? Maybe he is connected to me in some way.'

'Ask him yourself.'

Aaditya started in surprise.

'He's here?'

'Yes. He's waiting in my visiting room, and says he wants to meet

you.'

'Shit!'

Dr Bakshi smiled.

'Now that you've started attracting sponsors with your celebrity status, go and charm a few more rupees out of them.'

Aaditya looked to be on the verge of panic.

'Who is this guy and why does he want to meet me? What's his name?'

'Here's his card. As for the rest, I'm afraid I know as little as you.'

Aaditya looked at the gold embroidered card the principal had just handed him.

The name printed on the card was N.Muni. Wondering what was going on, Aaditya set out to meet this mysterious sponsor.

THREE

Admittedly, Aaditya was still a fresher and yet to see his first college festival, but he had never imagined a corporate sponsor could look the way this one did. Even before he entered the room, he saw the man sitting at the table through the partially open blinds. He had long hair that was tied in a thick ponytail, he seemed to be in his forties, thin to the point of being gaunt. He wore jeans and a loose-fitting T-shirt. As Aaditya entered the room, he noticed something even more odd. The man had a long black case next to him. From its shape it looked like it contained either a guitar or some other similar musical instrument. All in all, this sponsor who had insisted on meeting Aaditya looked more like an aging rock star than a Vice President of any corporation.

When Aaditya greeted him, to his surprise, the man stood up and folded his hands in greeting.

An aging rock star who believes in traditional values.

This new sponsor seemed to get weirder and more interesting by the minute, but weird or not, he was a potential big contributor to the college, so Aaditya got down to business.

'Mr Muni, it's a pleasure to meet you. I was told you wanted to specifically meet me, so please do let me know how I may be of assistance.'

The man looked Aaditya over, then he smiled back and nodded.

'Yes, you are indeed the one I was told helped my colleagues.'

Aaditya had no idea what he was referring to. He had never had anything to do with the organization Mr Muni claimed to belong to, and while some of the senior students may have approached companies for sponsorships for the festival, as a fresher, Aaditya had nothing to do with it. He began to guess that it may just be a case of mistaken identity and tried to clear it up.

'Mr Muni, I'm afraid I don't have much background on your organization but I guess someone from our college must have approached one of your colleagues for a sponsorship. I'm not sure where my name came in, but I would be more than happy to help in any way possible or perhaps get you in touch with one of the students on the organizing committee for the festival.'

'We are a global entity with diversified interests, and as for how you could help us, I would prefer to talk outside the college.'

That was a strange request, but considering how unconventional this Mr Muni had been so far, Aaditya agreed to play along.

'Where would you like to meet?'

Mr Muni got up, gathering his case as he replied. 'Let us talk over a coffee.'

So far Aaditya had remained pretty detached from what happened in college, other than hanging out with Sam and iPod, but now that the principal himself was involved, he didn't want to screw this up and cost the college lots of money in potential funds. So he readily agreed, and followed Mr Muni's taxi on his bike. For some reason, Mr Muni seemed to want to meet at Connaught Place. This was fine with Aaditya. Once the meeting was over, he could loiter at some bookstores before going home. As things turned out, Mr Muni led Aaditya to Oxford Bookstore, and they were soon seated at the café.

'I love the smell of new books. So invigorating, so inspiring. What will you have?' Mr Muni asked politely.

Aaditya ordered a juice, while Mr Muni got a tea. Mr Muni chattered on about books he wanted to read, and gradually Aaditya tried to steer the discussion back to the subject at hand.

'Mr Muni, do let me know how I can help you and what you had in mind in terms of sponsoring our festival.'

'Aaditya, I actually have no interest in your college or in your festival.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand. Why did you come to our college then?'

Mr Muni leaned back in his chair, smiling.

'I had to make up a story so that I would have a reason to meet you.'

Aaditya wasn't sure any more where this was headed, and Mr Muni made it worse with his next words.

'My interest lies in you.'

Before Aaditya could say anything, his phone beeped an incoming SMS and Aaditya glanced down to see a message from Deepak. It read *Having fun? Where did you disappear after college?*

He laughed. 'I get it. Has Deepak put you up to this?'

Now it was Mr Muni's turn to look puzzled as Aaditya continued, 'That clown! Must be his idea of a practical joke. Look, Mr Muni, I think we've both been had. I assure you I'm straight and have no interest in men, and if he told you otherwise, he was just trying to have a laugh at our expense.'

Aaditya scanned the room.

'Knowing him, he's probably here, waiting to come up and reveal his great plot.'

When he looked back at Mr Muni, the smile had been replaced by a look of concern.

Time to get out of here, Aadi.

As Aaditya mumbled a goodbye and got up to leave, Mr Muni laid

a hand on his right arm. Aaditya was at least five inches taller than him and outweighed him by a handsome margin, but the man was deceptively strong, and when Aaditya tried, he could not shake off his arm.

'Look Mr Muni, I don't want a scene. Take your hand off me, and I'll walk out of here, and we end this matter without making it messy.'

To his surprise, the man looked at him beseechingly, almost pleading with him to stay.

'You do not understand. This is no joke. I want to talk to you about the events you witnessed last night at the Old Fort, where it seems you crossed paths with two of my colleagues. Obviously I did not want to have that conversation in your college.'

Stunned, Aaditya sat down.

'We would have had no way of tracking you, but when you posted about the incident on an online forum, we knew who and where you were.'

A thousand things were swirling through Aaditya's mind. Not least of which was the realization of just what a fool he had been to post details of the incident online.

'Who the hell are you?' blurted out Aaditya.

Mr Muni just shook his head slightly.

'That is not important.'

Aaditya cut him off in mid-sentence. 'I saw some men being killed there, so it is very important. And what in god's name were those aircraft?'

Mr Muni touched Aaditya's arm again, but this time gently, as if to reassure him.

'You need to believe me, we are the good guys.'

'So what are you? CIA, Special Operations of some sort? I've never seen or heard of any force using aircraft like that, and I'm sure India does not have anything like them in service.'

'Aaditya, it's not important who we are. In fact, we would be happy to ignore you, apart from deleting anything you post online. But I am forced to meet you like this because we think you may have placed yourself in great danger.'

'Danger?'

Mr Muni ordered another juice for Aaditya. 'Calm down and listen carefully. Did you pick anything up from the site of the incident? We swept the area later and have confirmed through our reconnaissance drones that nobody else approached the place during and after the incident.'

These guys must be the CIA, thought Aaditya, wondering why the hell he had to go and get involved the previous night.

'Please tell me, Aaditya. Did you pick anything up from the site of

the incident?'

Aaditya suddenly remembered the cylinder and was about to blurt it out when he checked himself. He had no idea who this man was and whether he was to be trusted. The last thing he wanted to do was to get further involved in this mess.

'No, Mr Muni, I did not pick up anything.'

The man stared into his eyes intently for a few seconds. Though his heart was hammering, Aaditya did not flinch. Mr Muni got up and began to leave, then turned to Aaditya.

'If what you say is true, then in a way it's good for you, since your involvement in this ends, and you will never hear from us again. It is a separate matter that if those who attacked my colleague last night picked up the object we seek, then we have suffered a setback.'

Aaditya just stared at him, not willing to give an inch.

'Just remember, Aaditya, if you do have it, then there may be others seeking it, and they may be more persistent that I am and willing to harm you to get it. If you need me, just call the number on my card.'

He left, and Aaditya finished his drink in one long gulp. What a day! Now all he wanted to do was go home, pick up the goddamned cylinder and throw it away, maybe in the Yamuna river. That would be the end of this bloody episode, and he could finally get back to his life.

***

The rest of the evening passed much more pleasantly. Aaditya had planned on going straight home, but changed his mind fast when he saw a missed call from Supriya. He called her back, apologizing for the constant interruptions, conveniently blaming them on a last-minute movie plan that Sam had hatched. At seven in the evening, they were together, sipping coffee at the Taj Man Singh hotel. Aaditya noted that her tastes were probably too expensive for him to try and pick up the tab every time, but tonight, he was not going to be stingy. Supriya was perfect as far as first dates went-listening intently to him and laughing at his jokes. If she was only pretending, she was a good actress. For his part, Aaditya needed no acting to show how interested he was.

He dropped her home at Golf Links, where she stayed with her parents. He wished the bike ride had lasted longer, with her holding on to him, and when he rode away after wishing her good night, he promised himself that he would be seeing her soon enough.

Slightly lost in thought and very happy, Aaditya entered his apartment close to ten o'clock.

For once, he was in no mood to go online or even take off on one of his online sorties. The day had started weirdly enough with Mr Muni and his cryptic comments, but it had ended just fine-a date with an attractive woman and the prospect of seeing her again soon. As he changed and lay down on his bed, he looked at the strange cylinder on his bedside table. All he wanted was to be rid of it once and for all. He had it all planned out. Tomorrow, on the way to college, he would dump the damned cylinder in the river, and then forget about Mr Muni and the CIA, or whatever organization he worked for.

Aaditya was having a decidedly pleasant dream, the details of which were later fuzzy but involved Supriya in various stages of undress, when he was awakened by a sudden noise. As he turned on his bedside lamp, he saw that his artificial leg, which he took off every night before sleeping, had fallen to the ground. It was just after three in the morning. He decided to go to the bathroom and then have a glass of water. He swung himself off the bed and attached his leg, and after a trip to the bathroom, was in the living room, opening the fridge door to get some water.

That was when he heard the slight scraping noise outside his front door. He quietly shut the fridge door, enveloping his house in darkness. The corridor outside was still lit, and through the narrow gap under the front door, he could see shadows moving outside.

Shit.

He wondered if Mr Muni and his cohorts had come to check for themselves whether or not he had their precious cylinder. Whoever was outside was not making a particularly good attempt at being quiet, since they seemed to be muttering among themselves. That made it bad news on several counts.

One, there seemed to be at least two or three of them. Two, they were probably not petty thieves. There had been burglaries in the neighborhood before, almost all of them inside jobs involving the household help, and if the thieves had scoped out the neighborhood, there was little reason to strike a place occupied by a single college student, who would have little by way of valuables at home. And finally, if this did involve Mr Muni and his friends, then he was in deep shit, especially after the violence he had witnessed at the Old Fort.

Aaditya's mind raced as the men outside tried to pick the lock.

Think, think.

He rushed to his bedroom and slid the cylinder behind his back, tucking it into his shorts. Hardly a stroke of genius, but why make it easier for them, if in fact this had anything to do with the cylinder. He had nothing at home that could have served as a weapon except a fruit knife that would likely elicit more laughs than fear from the

intruders, so he decided that in this case, discretion was the better part of valor.

Aaditya's apartment was on the ninth floor, and just one floor below the roof. He climbed out his bedroom window. Just as he heard his front door open, he began climbing up a pipe to reach the roof. He really did not have much by way of a plan, but getting as far away as possible from the intruders making their way into his apartment seemed like as good an idea as any. A few minutes later, he was on the roof, trying to hide in a corner near the large water tank. He had no idea what was going on in his apartment, and he really didn't care much for the cylinder, but he realized that in the chaos, he had forgotten his good luck charm. His hopes that the intruders would get what they wanted and then be on their way were shattered when a few minutes later, the door to the roof swung open.

Still concealed behind the water tank, he heard heavy footsteps echoing across the roof.

'We know you are here. Make it easier for yourself and come out now.'

Aaditya peered around the corner and realized that his efforts at concealment had been useless. There were three men standing no more than five feet away, and they seemed to know exactly where he was. How the hell had they managed that? The dull roar of something flying overhead told him how.

Realizing he was trapped, he stepped out, keeping his hands up, though he seriously doubted the men saw him as even a bit of a threat. As he walked closer to them, he got a better look. Two seemed to be identical twins of the men he had encountered at the fort, the same size, the same colour, and the same peculiar ridged forehead. But it was the third man who worried him the most. He was considerably smaller than the other two, perhaps equal to Aaditya in height, but was built like a tank. His eyes were covered by dark glasses even at this time of night. The swagger with which he walked, and the way the two larger men seemed to make way for him left no doubt who was in charge. He walked towards Aaditya, smiling, but with little humour in his expression.

'Please come with us to your apartment. I think we have some talking to do.'

Aaditya contemplated resisting, and as if reading his mind, the man took out a curved blade from a scabbard on his shin. It was similar to the blades Aaditya had seen the previous night, no more than six inches long and slightly curved at the end, but with its razor sharp edge glinting even in this faint light, it looked deadly enough. The man moved the shiny blade in a circular motion in front of his face and then suddenly extended his arm straight, stopping it when

the blade was pointed straight at Aaditya's face.

'I am told you know how to fight. Believe me, I would love to indulge you and perhaps cut your eyes out and carry them back to feed my dogs.'

Aaditya involuntarily took a step back as the man continued. 'But I have been told to just have a chat and learn a bit more about an item we are interested in. So shall we?'

It was hardly a request as the man grabbed an arm in such a vice-like grip that Aaditya felt as if his entire right hand were on fire.

Five minutes later, he was back in his apartment, sitting on his sofa. The two larger men were standing behind him, ready in case he tried to make any trouble while their leader was sitting on the sofa next to Aaditya. He was leaning back, his legs crossed, as if he had come to catch up with an old friend.

'First, Aaditya Ghosh, please be so kind as to hand over the cylinder.'

Aaditya figured lying would serve little purpose so he reached behind his back and pulled the cylinder out of the elastic waistband of his shorts, handing it over. The man handled the cylinder almost reverentially, passing it between his fingers lightly, bringing it close so he could peer inside, though even now he had not taken off his glasses. He then handed it to one of his men. In the light of his apartment, Aaditya had got a closer look at his tormentors. The two larger men were not only as dark as he had remembered and had the distinctive ridge over their eyes, but parts of both their faces were covered in hair, looking strangely more like bears than men. As one of them took off a glove to handle the cylinder, Aaditya saw his hand was also covered by a thin lining of hair.

What the hell were they?

He had little time to observe further as the man seated next to him prodded his prosthetic leg with his knife.

'So now they have an army of cripples to fight us.'

As the two men behind him sniggered, Aaditya felt anger rising within him.

'You have your cylinder, now leave me alone.'

The man picked at his fingernails with his blade.

'It's not as simple as that. You were there when so many of my daityas were crippled or killed. I had to burn them myself lest they be discovered. What a waste, but I don't tolerate failure.'

Aaditya now remembered that the man with matted hair had also called the attackers by that term.

'So first of all, will you tell me how you are involved in this? Are you one of them inserted to live with men? Or are you a paid agent?'

Aaditya had no idea what the man was referring to, and when he

said so, the reaction was as instantaneous as it was brutal. The left hand shot out at blinding speed, landing a stinging blow on Aaditya's face. His lip cut and bleeding, Aaditya recoiled in pain and surprise.

'We know who you spent your morning with. How do you know my old friend Narada?'

Narada??

A second's delay in answering and the man lashed out again, but this time Aaditya was ready. He blocked the man's blow and struck back, landing a solid punch to the temple. The man rocked back, and as his two men grabbed Aaditya's shoulders from behind, he bellowed in rage.

'I will cut your heart out and eat it myself! But first, I will extract every drop of information you possess, even if I have to bleed it out of you.'

Till that point, Aaditya had harboured hopes that they would take the cylinder and be gone, and he had cooperated with them. However, he had no intention of being slaughtered like a lamb. He rocked his head back, connecting with one of the men's jaws. As the man loosened his grip in surprise and pain, Aaditya slammed his fist into the other man's eyes. Free now, he vaulted over the sofa, and ignoring the pain in his right leg from the impact, ran into his bedroom, locking the door behind him. He picked up his mobile, wallet and good luck patch from his bedside and climbed up to the roof, hoping to escape down the fire ladder on the other side of the building. He never had the time. The three men were barely a few feet behind him, having battered down his bedroom door in seconds.

Aaditya saw them climb on to the roof, and suddenly remembered what Mr Muni had said. He looked in his wallet for the visiting card and dialed the number. Before he could say anything, the larger of the three slammed into him, sending him down to the ground. Their leader was now upon Aaditya, landing a series of hammering blows. Aaditya blocked one or two, but the man was too strong and too fast, and Aaditya fell back. He saw the man bring his blade up. Aaditya landed one last desperate blow, a kick that was perhaps more painful for him than for the man. He stepped back, pivoted on his left leg, and landed a roundhouse kick with his right leg. The man swerved out of the way, but the kick slapped him across the face, sending his dark glasses flying. The two other men had now pinioned Aaditya's arms and held him against the roof's railing. The smaller man stood over Aaditya, blade in hand, and without his glasses on, Aaditya got his first look at the man's eyes.

They were not the eyes of a human being, but slanted, green and scaly, the eyes of a serpent.

That was when Aaditya began screaming.

***

The blade was but inches from Aaditya's right eye when an explosion of light shattered the darkness. His attackers turned to see what was happening. A streak of light streamed through one of the big men holding him, turning him instantly into a pile of ash. The two remaining men rolled away from beams of light aimed at them, producing small handheld devices no larger than a mobile phone through which they fired back with streaks of light. Aaditya took advantage of the chaos to hide behind the water tank, as he watched the bizarre battle unfold on the rooftop.

The white aircraft with the curved nose that he had seen the previous night was back, hovering a few feet above the roof, and beams of light were streaking out of its fuselage, targeting the two men on the roof. Then realizing that this strategy was not working, the craft came lower till it was just a couple of feet above the rooftop, and two figures leapt out.

Aaditya had seen both of them before. One was the man with the matted hair, still dressed in tiger-striped tights, who leapt through the air, stabbing the remaining large man through the neck with his trident. The other was the woman Aaditya had seen earlier. She was still dressed in white, with a long red mark running down her forehead. She engaged the man with the snake eyes.

Aaditya watched in fascination as they traded blow for blow, the snake-eyed man armed with the curved blade that had been about to pluck out one of Aaditya's eyes. They seemed to be blocking each other's blows till the man got an opening and lashed out with his right foot, sending the woman staggering back. She recovered in a split second when the man with the matted hair came to her rescue. He had already reduced his opponent to a pile of smoking ashes. Now he leapt through the air, his agility belying his height and bulk, and landed a crushing kick on the face of the snake-eyed man. His sunglasses destroyed, and his snake eyes revealed for everyone to see, the man reeled back, and slashed with his blade. The man with the matted hair avoided the blow by inches and landed another kick that sent Snake Eyes flying, landing on his back.

It was now two against one, but the man with the snake eyes seemed to be holding his own, staying close so that his opponents could not use their handheld weapon, and countering them blow for blow. The man with the matted hair was however slowly but surely gaining an edge and Aaditya guessed that it was but a matter of time before he struck a killing blow.

That was of course till further pandemonium was created by the

arrival of two saucer-shaped flying vehicles. Six dark giants rappelled out of them, and the tables were neatly turned, with the man in the matted hair and the woman with him now going on the defensive. Seven against two turned out to be odds too heavy for them, and even though one of the attackers was soon lying lifeless on the ground, the others pressed home.

If Aaditya had thought he had seen it all, one more flying vehicle appeared. This one was blue and seemed to be painted to resemble a peacock. It landed on the roof feet away from Aaditya, and a solitary figure leapt out and joined the melee. The newcomer was smaller than the other men, but moved with the grace and agility of a gymnast. He cartwheeled and rolled through the five men in black, striking so fast with a concealed blade that Aaditya could not even see a single blow land. When he had come up in a half crouch on the far side of the roof, Aaditya saw that three men were down. Now it was four versus three, and as another dark giant fell, Aaditya could see the man with the snake eyes begin to falter. His two remaining men were still engaged in a life or death struggle, but he had begun to move back slowly but surely.

As the battle raged, Aaditya took his first close look at the blue craft that was near him. It had a tapered nose and a raised transparent canopy like many fighter jets but nothing else about it resembled any aircraft Aaditya had ever seen. There was no tail fin, no signs of any air intakes or jet engines. The fuselage was flat and thin as if it didn't have to be encumbered with things like fuel or engines, and as far as Aaditya could see, the aircraft was shaped like a triangle.

Aaditya looked behind him to see that one of the saucer-shaped craft had now come within feet of the roof, and Snake Eyes had begun to move towards it. Unfortunately that brought Aaditya straight in his path. He stopped, glaring at Aaditya, murder glowing in his reptilian eyes, his blade at the ready. This is the end, Aaditya thought, when the man with the matted hair called out, 'Maya, you coward! Don't leave your daityas to die while you escape to your hellhole. At least die an honourable death.'

Maya swerved out of the way as the trident that had been hurled his way missed him by mere inches. Aaditya saw that the cylinder that had been the cause of all this mayhem had fallen out of Maya's grasp and the woman had picked it up. The two remaining giants, who had been referred to as daityas, were still trying to hold back their opponents in order to give their leader a chance to escape. Maya now resumed his retreat, running towards the waiting saucer, and Aaditya. His blade was out, his arm extended, and Aaditya knew it would be seconds before he was cut down.

In panic, he looked around him and saw the blue flying vehicle

standing very close. He ran towards it, and using a small step-ladder embedded on the side, climbed aboard. He was of course curious about what this craft was, but for now, he just wanted to get out of Maya's way. There were two seats arranged side by side, and a small empty space behind them. He crawled into the space, hoping to climb out as soon as Maya was gone.

He heard the faint buzz of the saucers flying away and raised his head, ready to make a getaway before anyone saw him.

Someone climbed into the cockpit.

Shit!

Aaditya pressed himself against the cold wall behind him, wishing he could make himself invisible. But nobody was looking for him. It was much, much worse. Within seconds, the pilot powered up the craft, and it took off vertically, then flew off at breakneck speed, flattening Aaditya against the wall.

The craft flew on to its destination, taking Aaditya with it.

FOUR

Aaditya had no idea where he was, but from glancing at his mobile phone, he learnt two things. First, the flight had so far lasted eighteen minutes, and second, he was now out of range of his cellular network. The flight had been fairly level and smooth, and as he suddenly felt the craft slow down and descend, he guessed that he was at the end of his journey.

The cockpit was momentarily enveloped in darkness as the craft descended, then it landed with a soft thump, and Aaditya heard the canopy slide open with a hiss. He waited for several minutes after he heard the pilot exit the craft, then cautiously raised his head to see if the coast was clear. When he saw no obvious signs of activity, he slowly climbed out. What he saw took his breath away.

The craft he had hitched a ride on was one of several lined up across the length of a long corridor. Most were of a similar size, and each sported animal colours and designs. The craft he had been in was coloured like a peacock, down to eyes on each side of the nose. Next to it was a similar craft coloured like a tiger and then, the white craft with raised horns he had seen during the fight at the Old Fort. At the far end of the line, he saw much larger craft, perhaps as large as commercial airliners.

Where the hell was he?

The rational part of his mind was still saying that he had found himself in the middle of some top-secret operation, perhaps carried out by the CIA. He tried hard to explain away the beam weapons that instantly reduced men to ash as advanced weapons he had not seen or heard about and the man with the snake eyes as perhaps a mere figment of his fear and imagination. Nobody had eyes like a snake in real life, did they?

With no sign of anybody around, Aaditya walked till the far end of the corridor, marvelling at the unusual craft he saw arrayed before him. He was also wondering how he could get away. If this was indeed some secret government installation, surely they would let him go once they realized that he had got mixed up in thus purely by accident. There seemed to be no doors or windows obviously visible as he looked in vain for a way out. Then he heard soft footsteps behind him, and whirled around. Standing in front of him was the man with matted hair he had seen at the Old Fort and then on his rooftop.

In the bright light, Aaditya saw that the man looked quite fearsome. His muscled body and tiger-striped body-hugging suit were in themselves intimidating, but to add to the effect, his matted hair

was piled on top of his head, and his forehead and face seemed to be smeared with ash. Aaditya took a step back, not knowing what to expect. The man was looking at him curiously, and despite his fearsome appearance, his eyes seemed kind, and he spoke softly.

'How on earth did you get here?'

Aaditya realized that dressed in his old T-shirt and shorts that he wore to bed, and wearing no footwear, he must be looking like a vagabond. He reached into his pocket to fish out Mr Muni's card, hoping that would establish that he meant no harm. It turned out to be a bad move. The man started at Aaditya's sudden movement and before Aaditya knew what had happened, a massive punch landed on his face.

Everything went black.

When Aaditya regained consciousness, he was lying on the floor in a small room. There was no furniture around, and as he sat up, he rubbed his jaw where the man had struck him. It still hurt like hell. He realized that his phone, wallet and lucky patch had all been taken from him. As he sat contemplating the situation, a portion of the wall in front of him slid open. Mr Muni walked in, a bemused expression on his face.

Aaditya sprang to his feet and began to explain himself.

'Aaditya, relax. I know you meant no harm, and I know what happened on your rooftop, and I apologize if the one who struck you hurt you.'

'Mr Muni, I still don't know which organization you work for, and honestly, I don't care. All I want to do is to get back to my home.'

Mr Muni sighed.

'Yes, I was afraid you'd want that.'

A sinking feeling came into Aaditya's stomach at those words.

'You can't keep me here! I swear I will not tell a soul anything. Just send me back, and you won't ever hear from me again.'

Mr Muni walked closer to Aaditya. He looked almost sad.

'Aaditya, I wish it were as simple as that, and that I could decide on your fate all by myself. But the stakes here are higher than you can imagine.'

'So what, I'm your prisoner now?'

Mr Muni began to walk towards the wall, indicating that their conversation was over. Then he stopped and turned.

'I do hope you come to see yourself as a guest till we figure out the best course of action.'

With those words, the wall slid open, and Mr Muni was gone, leaving Aaditya alone in the room. Barely having slept the previous night, fatigue soon got the better of him, and he dozed off on the floor. He was awakened by the sound of the door sliding open. He sat

up, still groggy, and unsure of how long he had been asleep. A young woman entered the room, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She looked no older than a college student, and was carrying a palmtop computer in one hand and a plastic bag in the other. Her dark hair was tied in a ponytail. Under other circumstances, Aaditya may have liked to linger longer on her, since she was certainly easy on the eye. But that was hardly the most pressing matter on his mind now.

He got up as she approached.

'Hello, Aaditya. I'm sorry but we aren't used to having too many unexpected guests, but I hope I can help make your stay a bit more comfortable.'

Her accent didn't sound like she was from India.

'Comfortable? I feel like I'm in Guantanamo Bay or something right now. So if you are the CIA, what comes next? Torture?'

The woman flinched at his harsh words, then regained her composure.

'Nothing like that will happen. I have some fresh clothes for you. Just leave your old clothes in the bag and we'll get them cleaned.'

Realizing how dishevelled his clothes must look, he grudgingly took the bag. As the woman turned to leave, he realized he did have something else on his mind.

'Excuse me, how do I, err, go to the bathroom?'

She smiled, something Aaditya found himself enjoying despite everything.

'Just ask,'she answered. Then, seeing Aaditya's quizzical expression, 'Just say aloud whatever you want. Try it, it's fun.'

As she walked out, Aaditya thought jail cell or not, why not give it a try? Feeling a bit silly, he said aloud, 'I'd like to go to the bathroom please.'

To his shock, a section of the wall slid open, revealing a fully furnished bathroom. When he was done, he changed into the clothes the woman had left. They were a plain white full sleeve top and track pants. But when he slid them on, they tightened around him, fitting him perfectly. Not bad, he thought. Then he said aloud, 'Can I get a Coke and a burger?'

To his delight, a section of the wall swiveled open to reveal a small table and chair. On the table was a tray with a can of Coke and a burger, which didn't taste bad at all. Further investigation revealed that when he asked for it, a bed would slide out for him to sleep on. Feeling cocky, he asked to be let go. Not surprisingly, nothing happened.

Jail or not, he was at least comfortable, well fed and could rest.

And now, he would plot a way to get out.

***

Aaditya had no way of knowing how long he had been there, but just judging from the number of times his body had told him that it needed sleep or eat, he guessed it must have been at least two days. During that time, he received no further visitors.He focused on keeping himself strong, not knowing what lay ahead. So, he ate well and exercised every opportunity he got. Finally, when the door did slide open, he saw Mr Muni, dressed in the same kind of clothes that Aaditya wore. Except that they were saffron in colour.

Mr Muni held up his lucky patch.

'I understand this belonged to your father. I thought it appropriate that you keep it.'

Aaditya took it and put it into the pocket on the side of his trousers, wondering how they knew, but he had a few questions of his own.

'Narada.'

Mr Muni looked at him, and then smiled, realizing that he had given away his name. Aaditya continued. 'So that is your name-that's what that snake-eyed freak called you. Here is what I have figured out-you are obviously some secret force, and you're worried that I will compromise you. All I've seen are the planes and this cell; I don't know anything more. Just let me go. Please.'

Narada called for two chairs, which the wall moved to reveal and he motioned for Aaditya to sit down.

'We have our secrets to protect, for sure, but it's your well being that is also at risk.'

Aaditya snorted dismissively.

'Look Aadi, I hope you're okay with me calling you by your nickname--if you had just told me you had the cylinder we could have avoided a lot of trouble. We would have taken it and made it known that you were nobody, just someone caught up by accident. But now, even if we let you go, they will come for you. They will not believe so easily that you have nothing to do with us.'

'They?'

'The ones who came to your apartment. This time, my superiors will not risk coming to your aid. We risked too much, revealing ourselves during the incident on your roof.'

Aaditya was getting tired of being a pawn. It seemed that all this Narada and his colleagues cared about was their agenda, and he was expendable. He stewed in impotent rage. The next day when the door slid open and the woman who had given him the fresh clothes came in, a plan began to form.

'I just came to see how you're doing. Mr Muni told me you were

troubled and I thought if nothing else, you may want to chat.'

The last thing Aaditya wanted to do was to make small talk, but he smiled and summoned two chairs, asking her to sit. Being the polite host to the hilt, if only in his own prison cell, he also called for some juice. The woman seemed genuinely surprised at this change in his mood.

'I never asked you your name.'

'It's Tanya.'

She asked about Aaditya, and he told her about his college and his background, and then asked her what she did.

'I handle Public Relations here. You may be surprised, but you're not the first person to have stumbled on to them. Of course, I don't think anybody has got involved in such dramatic circumstances for many years.'

Something in what she said struck Aaditya as odd, and he tried to put his finger on it. She sensed the change in his mood. 'Is something wrong?'

'You said "them".'

Tanya didn't get it at first, so Aaditya repeated himself. 'You referred to this organization as "them", not "us". That sounded weird. So, what is your real story?'

Tanya smiled, realizing her lapse.

'It still takes some getting used to. I am not one of the, let's say, original crew. I am originally from Canada, but have learnt to make this place, and this organization, my home.'

'So you don't fly around in those fancy machines and carry weird weapons, do you?'

Aaditya said it with a smile. Tanya took it at face value and replied with a laugh, 'No, thank heavens. I just do the PR work sitting at a desk in front of a phone and a laptop. They tried teaching me self defence, but I was hopeless, and why would I need it anyway?'

As she got up to leave, Aaditya asked her, 'Look, if you're not too busy, maybe you could stop by sometimes. I could go crazy just sitting here by myself.'

Tanya just smiled, but she did come back. Over her next four visits, Aaditya learnt several things. First, that there still seemed to be no resolution in sight for his situation. Second, he took careful notice of the exact spot where the door would slide open when Tanya came or left, and once she was gone, timed just how fast he could get there. Finally, he realized that he really enjoyed spending time with Tanya. She seemed to be genuinely concerned about him and went out of her way to make his stay less miserable. That made Aaditya feel just a little pang of guilt for what he was about to do.

The next time Tanya came, she had brought a few magazines for

Aaditya. When they finished chatting, she got up to leave. Aaditya stopped her with a gentle tap to the shoulder.

'Hey Tanya, I wish we had met somewhere else. Soon I'll be gone and I doubt these spooks will let me come near them or here any time soon.'

Tanya smiled, but it was a smile tinged with sadness.

'Aadi, I really think my work is important, but I do miss having a normal life. Meeting you made me remember what that could be like. When they do let you go, I'll miss you.'

Just as she reached the door, Aaditya sprang into action. He reached her just as the door began to slide open. Aaditya pushed her aside and leapt outside the open door. She was too shocked to even resist.

He found himself in a long plain corridor, but having learnt how things worked here, he ran along its length, commanding doors to open, hoping that outside of his cell, the doors would open on command as well. He was about to give up when to his relief, a door slid open to his left. He ran through it, barely hearing Tanya's cries for him to stop.

He didn't know how much time he had or just how far he could go, but he was not going to stay cooped up in a cell any longer. His captors may be the CIA for all he cared, but either they had to tell him what they wanted with him or let him go. He was done with being a prisoner.

To his relief he soon found himself at the hangar where he had landed. The craft were still there, and while he was tempted, he realized that he would never get the time to figure out how to fly one before he was discovered. However, being in the hangar meant that the exit could not be far away. He looked desperately along the length of the hangar, wondering where he should start looking. He heard muffled footsteps coming from the wall behind him, and ran as fast as he could towards the end of the flight line.

Two or three figures emerged from the door he had opened. All around him there were nothing but closed walls. He desperately kept asking for doors to open, but either there were no doors here or they had been disabled when Aaditya's escape had become known. He was but a few feet from the far wall and about to give up when it suddenly swung open, revealing the same blue coloured craft on which he had come aboard. Oblivious to his escape, the pilot was coming in for a landing, and Aaditya took advantage of the open door to run outside.

What he saw made him stop in his tracks.

He was standing in a snow-covered rocky valley, with nothing around as far as the eye could see but jagged peaks topped with snow. With no sign of any humans or buildings around, it seemed as if he

had been transported to an alien landscape.

***

Then the biting cold hit him. Though his clothes looked no thicker than an average cotton track suit, they somehow insulated all parts of his body that they covered, but his face and hands were exposed, and he was barefoot. He had no idea what the temperature was, his breath came out in smoky billows, and even though he had been outside for only a few seconds, he began to feel his hands and left foot go numb.

He glanced back inside the hangar. The blue craft had landed, and its pilot, the same young man he had seen on his roof, was running towards him. Aaditya stopped for a second, considering the choices before him. Should he give up and go back to the uncertain fate that awaited him inside his cell, or should he take his chances in the inhospitable landscape he saw in front of him? When he saw his pursuer take out a small device from his pocket, similar to the weapon he had seen used on his rooftop, he decided to take his chances.

Every step hurt, and Aaditya's left foot was already almost completely numb. For once, he thanked fate for his prosthetic right foot, which was immune to the cold, and soldiered on. He dove into a small crack on the side of the hill, hoping he could conceal himself from his pursuer, and also think through what he would do next. For a few minutes, it seemed his plan had worked. He could hear movement outside, but nobody disturbed his hiding place.

'The heat sensors show something here.'

With those words, the game was up. The pilot of the blue craft who had been chasing him reached in and looked at him, grinning. He seemed little more than a boy just out of school, with a thin face, unruly hair and dimples that showed prominently when he smiled. Aaditya contemplated resisting, but he was already so numb with cold that he wasn't sure what exactly he could offer by way of resistance. Also, despite his disarming appearance, he had seen how deadly the young man had been on his rooftop.

'First you steal a ride in my vimana, now you go and try to freeze yourself to death. What's with you?'

Aaditya didn't know what to say so he clasped the young man's hand and was pulled out of his hiding place. He found Narada standing there, none of the young man's amusement on his face.

'Kartik, go and try to cool down your father. I think he's ready to kill our restless friend here. He told me he should have hit him harder in the hangar.'

Aaditya remembered the ash-covered man and how he had

knocked him out with one blow, and wondered just how much trouble he was in. As Kartik left, Narada turned to him.

'Get back in here. When you have some hot food in you and we're sure you won't suffer any hypothermia, I'll come and meet you.'

Narada walked Aaditya back to his cell, and when he left, Aaditya sat down, feeling quite foolish. That gave way to even more embarrassment when Tanya walked in.

'Look, I'm sorry I…'

Tanya cut him off with a curt glance, and wordlessly put some hot soup in front of him and gave him a warm blanket. She walked out, leaving Aaditya feeling even more miserable. His escape attempt had been a total fiasco, and he had betrayed the trust of the one person who had been nothing but decent and friendly towards him. He sulked in his cell for a day or more before Narada came to him again.

'Aadi, it's time we parted ways.'

Aaditya got up, startled at the announcement.

'You're going to let me go?'

When Narada just nodded, Aaditya asked with indignation, 'If you could let me go just like that, why did you wait so many days? Do you realize that my friends are probably already in panic because people can't get in touch with me? God, they must be filing police reports by now.'

Narada smiled. 'That's the least of your worries. Your professors have received an email saying you are not well, and anyone who calls your mobile gets a recording that sounds pretty close to your voice saying the same thing.'

Aaditya was too stunned to respond as Narada continued, 'We were genuinely worried our enemies would come for you. Some of us argued that in the larger scheme of things it doesn't matter, but that is what makes us different from them. Every life is sacred. We have sent out the feelers that you are not connected with us in any way. We don't know if they believe us, plus we can't risk you trying another escape. So you earn a flight back.'

With those words, Narada tossed Aaditya's clothes and belongings towards him.

'Get changed. I'll be waiting outside.'

Narada had been nothing but civil, but Aaditya could sense a hint of disdain in his voice. Honestly, he didn't care-whoever these people were, they had no right to keep him confined here. And no matter how unexciting his regular life was, he would pick it any day over being locked up in a cell. He followed Narada outside, but before he entered the hangar, Narada asked him to wait. Aaditya was startled as Narada put a blindfold over his eyes.

'Is this really necessary?'

'Yes it is. You have already seen too much for your own good.'

Feeling like a prisoner even though he was supposedly being released, Aaditya was led through the hangar. He then heard the voice of the young man who was called Kartik.

'Look, my friend, I'll be flying you home. Please don't try anything silly like taking off your blindfold. My father looks much bigger than me, but I can punch just as hard.'

The last line was accompanied by a laugh, but Aaditya had no doubts that the young man would carry through on his threat. He had no intention of being a hero; all he wanted to do now was to get home.

Aaditya was helped into the cockpit, and strapped in with a seat belt. He heard a soft hum as the engine powered on, but before the canopy closed and the craft took off, he felt a soft touch on his left hand, and heard a whisper, 'Goodbye.'

It was Tanya. Aaditya felt a slight pang of regret at how he had betrayed her trust and wished that he had gotten a chance to say sorry. He heard the canopy slide down around him, and then the craft seemed to lift slightly as it glided forward slowly, presumably towards the hangar doors. He felt himself being pushed back against the seat as the craft accelerated and then entered a steep climb. Aaditya had no idea how fast they were going, but within what seemed like a few seconds, the craft stabilized in level flight. He heard Kartik murmur next to him, 'Now we sit back and wait till we're over Delhi. Should be there in twenty-five minutes or less, but we're in no hurry, are we?'

Now that he was free, Aaditya's curiosity was running on overdrive. Where had the base been located? The kind of mountains he had seen were certainly not to be found anywhere in the Indian heartland. The closest one could find them was in the Himalayas. If indeed they had been there, flying to Delhi meant a one-way flight of more than one thousand kilometres at least. All his knowledge of flying and planes was now being exercised as he did some quick calculations.

Travelling that distance in less than twenty minutes meant flying at over twice the speed of sound all the way. That was if indeed they had been at the closest possible location to Delhi. No fighter aircraft could sustain Mach 2 for such a period of time and still have the endurance to cover such a long round trip. He corrected himself-no aircraft that he knew of. If anything, this experience was showing him that there were many things he had not the foggiest idea about.

Kartik must have guessed what he was thinking about.

'They say you're quite an aviation buff. Flying is my life, so I can imagine how curious you must be about the vimana we're in. Too bad

I can't tell you too much.'

Aaditya had heard that word before,

'Vimana? Doesn't sound like something the CIA or Americans would call their planes.'

Kartik seemed to mutter under his breath, as if regretting having spoken too much. After that, there was no more conversation.

The monotony of the flight began to get to Aaditya. He felt his body loosen up as the stress of the last few days drained away, and he was soon nodding off. He dreamt he was in a fighter plane under fire, and was being buffeted violently from side to side as it narrowly escaped exploding shells. When his head hit the seat behind him hard, he woke up with a start. It had not been a dream.

The craft was undertaking drastic maneuvers, swerving from one side to the other. There were loud explosions outside. Fighter pilots wore special pressurized suits to protect their bodies from the effects of pulling such maneuvers which often put pressures several times that of normal gravity on the body-G forces as they were called. But even in his shorts and T-shirt, he felt no major impact of G forces. However, he had little time to contemplate how the builders of this craft had managed yet another seemingly magical feat.

'What's going on?'

When there was no response, he shouted louder.

'Dammit, what the hell is going on!'

Kartik answered softly, but the tension was apparent in his voice.

'We're under fire.'

'Who? The freaks that you fought on my roof?'

No response. After a second, Kartik exclaimed, 'Is your mobile on?'

Aaditya remembered that he had turned it on when it had been returned to him.

'Oh God, that's how they are tracking us!'

Aaditya felt Kartik's hand reach into his pocket and take out his phone. Just then the craft shook more violently and he heard Kartik scream. Then there was silence.

'Kartik?'

No response.

Aaditya took off his blindfold. It was utter mayhem around him. Kartik lay slumped in his seat, blood oozing from his head. His seat belt was undone, and Aaditya guessed he had reached over to get the phone when the craft had suffered a near hit, and he had slammed his head against the wall. Aaditya looked frantically around, trying to see what was happening. The raised canopy gave unrestricted visibility, and Aaditya saw three dark shapes in the distance. As they came closer, he thought he recognized them as the saucer shaped craft he

had encountered earlier.

With Kartik out cold, they would be a sitting duck. He had no idea how this craft worked, but at least he was no stranger to flying planes. He looked at the cockpit in front of him, searching for the controls. He was flabbergasted. There seemed to be no flight controls- no joystick, no thrust controls, nothing.

How the hell did one fly this beast?

He looked over at Kartik and saw an earpiece tucked into his left ear. He plucked it out and placed it inside his own left ear. Within a couple of seconds, he heard some transmission. He could not be entirely sure but the voice seemed to belong to the ash-covered monster who had knocked him out.

'Are you there? Please acknowledge.'

Aaditya looked behind to see the three saucers circling him. They could have shot him down at leisure but perhaps they wanted to capture the craft he was in. They had him boxed in, one on either side and one behind and slightly above his position.

'Hi…this is Aadi. Kartik is out cold and we are surrounded by enemy craft. What the hell do I do?'

There was an ominous silence before he got a reply. 'We have a problem here. Now, I'll try and keep you alive. Just don't try and be a hero.'

So, surrounded by enemy craft, and in one he had no idea how to fly, Aaditya finally got a chance to live his dream of being a fighter pilot. At that moment, he would have happily traded all his flying dreams for a lifetime attending Donkey's classes and dealing with impossible assignments on Economic History.

FIVE

Aaditya didn't know how high he was flying so it was hard to judge distances, but the three pursuing craft were now bracketing him, one flying on each side of his craft and one directly behind him- on his six o'clock, as fighter pilots would say. His craft was now hovering in the sky. He was far from calm but realized that if they had wanted to destroy him, they would have done so easily by now. Instead, it looked like they wanted him to surrender. A new voice came over the headset. He had not heard this voice before. It was deeper than either Narada's or the ash-covered man's voice.

'Aadi, I gather that you are not new to flying. We have retrieved your NCC records, and you've got hundreds of hours in microlights and gliders.'

'Fat lot of good that will do me now.'

The voice that responded was slow, deliberate, and if he was trying to calm Aaditya down, he was beginning to succeed.

'The basics are no different, just the user interface is. Now tell me, your father was a fighter pilot, was he not? So you grew up around pilots and fighters, and the exploits of IndianBader on the Internet tell me that you know your way around fighters.'

Aaditya had no idea how they knew all this about him, but it helped to calm him.

'What's your name? If my life depends on you, let me at least know who I'm talking to.'

'My name is Indra. Now, as you may have gathered, they don't want to shoot you down. They will box you in and perhaps more of them are on the way to capture you. Look behind you, do you see the red tipped vimana behind you?'

Aaditya turned around and said he did.

'That is the vimana of Maya, who I gather you have already met.'

Aaditya remembered the snake-eyed man and shivered in spite of himself.

Then it struck Aaditya. 'How do you know who's behind me?'

'Because I am on the way. I should be there in less than five minutes.'

Aaditya let out a sigh of relief. Help was on the way, but how the hell would he get out, if Kartik could not be revived? Indra helped out, sensing his predicament.

'Look in Kartik's right ear. There is a small round plug there. Place it in your right ear.'

Aaditya did so, and for a second was struck by an intense

headache. He gasped in pain.

'What was that?'

'Don't worry, it's calibrating to your brain.'

What the hell did that mean?

'Now, just go with your instinct. What you think, the vimana will do for you. Just don't speed away or do any drastic maneuvers-get a hang of it till I come.'

Not sure how this would work, Aaditya asked himself where he was and what his bearings were. To his amazement, a holographic 3D map emerged out of thin air on his left. His vimana was represented by a blue dot, and the three enemy craft were depicted in red. He saw numbers below each dot. Those below his craft read 20,20500,217. There were a smattering of green dots, but all much further away.

'Indra, what are these numbers? Speed, altitude and bearing?'

'I told you it wouldn't be difficult to get a hang of it. It displays in units your mind relates to. In your case, I guess speed in kilometres per hour, altitude in feet and bearing relative to our base. The red dots are the asuras, and the added number below each is the range in kilometres from your vimana. The green dots are aircraft of your people.'

Your people. That was a strange way to put it.

When he wondered where he was, the map began displaying place names, showing that he was several hundred kilometres to the northeast of Delhi.

The enemy craft were no more than two kilometres away, and as he watched, the one behind him edged closer. He now saw another blue dot appear on the display. It was four hundred kilometres away and closing in at more than a thousand kilometres per hour, swooping down from an altitude of more than eighty thousand feet. His mind boggled both at the craft's performance and the fact that his radar, or whatever instrument the craft used, could pick it up at such a range.

'Now Aadi, don't move at all. I don't want to lose the advantage of surprise.'

On his display, Aaditya saw two yellow dots separate from Indra's vimana, and streak towards the craft around him at an impossibly high speed. He had barely had time to look around when the craft on either side exploded into giant fireballs and disappeared as if nothing had ever been there.

'Get out of the way now!' Indra screamed into his ears.

It seemed weird at first, but Aaditya mentally asked the craft to accelerate and willed it to bank sharply to the right. His first turn was way too sharp, and he soon found himself in a dive. In a fit of panic, his fingers grasped at thin air, trying to find the controls to pull up.

'Calm your mind, son.' Indra's voice boomed into his ear and he

forced himself to sit back, and while hardly calm, thought, *pull up.*

The craft came out of the dive. Still not used to the control system, Aaditya found himself involuntarily moving his body to the right or left as he maneuvered, but recovered enough to restore the craft to stable flight. He took out his lucky patch from his pocket and clutched it tightly in both hands. In part, it was like a safety blanket, helping to calm his nerves. In part, as he moved his hands, he used the patch like a joystick, so that he not only used his thoughts, but also hand movements that were more familiar, to control the craft. It seemed to help, as he managed to stop himself from abruptly jerking his craft around.

His problems were far from over though. His display showed the remaining red dot zooming in towards him.

Think you're at your damn PC. Think that this is another newbie out to earn his glory by trying to take on IndianBader. Once you thought you could be a fighter pilot-now don't be a chicken.

He hoped that would be enough to give him courage. However, soon he found himself facing a new danger, when a yellow dot separated from Maya's craft and moved towards his vimana. Aaditya noted that it was moving much slower than Indra's missiles. He did not dwell on that for too long, since he quickly realized that being shot at in a video game was very different from having a missile home in on you in real life. He moved his craft into a series of tight turns, but the missile kept closing in.

Do something to throw the missile off!

No sooner had he thought it when a flash enveloped his craft, temporarily blinding him. When he opened his eyes, the yellow dot was gone, and so was Maya's craft, which his display showed as speeding away at a speed of more than two thousand kilometres per hour. He looked out the window to see a craft just a few metres to his right. In the cockpit, he could make out a man, who raised his hand in a wave, as Indra's voice echoed over his headset.

'That bloody coward's run off again, but I am impressed. I thought you were done for when he fired. Now, shall we go back?'

Aaditya had been caught up in the adrenaline rush of the unexpected flying, but now he paused to think. He had been on his way home. Now he was expected to go back to the base where he had been a virtual prisoner. After seeing so much more of their so-called vimanas, would they ever allow him to go home?

'Aadi, can you hear me? Just ask the vimana to chart a course back to base, and you'll be on your way. I'll be right beside you.'

Instead, Aaditya found himself thinking *What's the fastest route to Delhi?*

The holographic display in front of him showed a glowing light

with 'Delhi' under it. At the speeds this craft seemed capable of, he could be there in less than a few minutes. He wasn't sure about where to land or how he would deal with the consequences of putting down this strange craft in public. But at least he would have a shot at getting back home.

Even before he consciously knew it, his mind had commanded the craft to chart a path for Delhi. His headset exploded into a cacophony of noise.

'Aadi, what are you doing? Don't do this, please.'

Aaditya tried to filter out the voice, but he could not ignore the young man lying slumped in his seat just next to him. A large pool of blood was gathering under Kartik's head, and while Aaditya did not know if he would live or not if they went back to base, he was sure of one thing. If he continued on to Delhi, there was little chance Kartik would survive, simply because the chaos that would accompany the arrival of such a strange craft would almost certainly mean that first aid would take a backseat.

'Aadi, stop now, or I will have to fire.'

It was not the threat that stopped Aaditya, but the fact that he just could not bring himself to sacrifice the life of a young man to get back his own. He was not sure if they would let him go after all he had seen, but his conscience could not bear the burden of the death of the young man next to him. So, as much as his head screamed at him to continue to Delhi, his heart won this debate, and he commanded his craft, 'Back to base.'

***

Aaditya watched the display before him as the craft set on a course back to its base. When he wondered where base was, a caption appeared under a dot on the map. It read, 'Kongka La'. The words meant nothing to him but soon he saw snow covered peaks appear over the horizon. He had guessed correctly. Base was indeed somewhere in the Himalayas.

Indra's craft was with him, leading the way, no more than a few hundred meters away. Aaditya could see no jet exhaust, and wondered what was propelling the craft. It seemed to be much larger than the one he was in, and was white in colour. As it peeled off towards the mountains below, Aaditya saw that its nose was shaped like an elephant, complete with curved tusks.

What was it with them and animal motifs on their craft?

'Aadi, follow me down and stay close.'

So with his good luck charm still firmly clenched in his hands, Aaditya maneuvered the craft into a shallow dive as he followed the

vimana ahead of him. Indra had entered into a narrow valley with snow-covered peaks on either side. As the space got narrower, he began to wonder if he could maneuver the craft in such a narrow space without plastering it all over one of the peaks.

Only when he saw a narrow opening slide open in a rock face ahead of him did he realize he had been holding his breath for several minutes. He watched Indra's craft glide into the opening, and he followed. Landing the vimana was easier than he had imagined. No sooner had he asked himself the question, *How do I land this thing,* than it began a slow and measured descent through the gap. He found himself inside the hangar where he had staged his ill-fated escape attempt. The cockpit canopy slip open when he commanded it to, and he found himself facing a veritable welcoming party.

There was Indra, who had alighted from his craft. He towered over Aaditya and may have looked menacing with his thick black beard, but his eyes were full of compassion. Then there was Narada, Kartik's father, the woman he had encountered during the fight at the Old Fort, and a number of other people he did not know, and then there was Tanya. As soon as the canopy opened, Kartik's father rushed in and pulled out his inert body. A small tracked vehicle came up and Kartik's body was laid down upon it, and the vehicle sped away.

'Do we still have time, Narada?'

Though he looked like a monster and killed like an assassin, Aaditya realized that Kartik's father was after all a father, and the anguish was apparent in his voice. Narada ran after the tracked vehicle, saying, 'I hope so.'

In all the chaos, everyone seemed to have forgotten Aaditya. He stepped down, wondering what he should do. Tanya walked up to him.

Whenever he had met her previously, her hair had been neatly tied in a ponytail behind her head, and her face had never betrayed any emotion. But now, her hair hung loosely around her, and her face was distraught. Aaditya could not be sure, but from her expression, it looked as if she had been crying.

She rushed towards him, and for a minute there was an awkward moment when he wondered whether he should hug her or not. To his relief, she stopped and then, as if through force of will, her professional facade was back.

'I'm glad you're okay.'

The adrenaline high of the battle behind him, Aaditya felt giddy and slumped against the craft.

'Aadi, are you okay?'

Aaditya exhaled audibly as he replied, 'I never thought I'd be happy to see myself be a prisoner of these freaks again, but I was

going to be totally screwed out there.'

That broke the ice. Tanya burst out laughing, and soon Aaditya found himself joining in, roaring in laughter, though there was nothing funny about what he had said.

Tanya touched him lightly on his arm, and Aaditya realized that in spite of himself, he was staring. Why the hell had he never noticed how attractive she was? Perhaps being held captive by some top-secret organization did that to you.

'Come on, I'll take you to your room.'

She walked him through a sliding door and into to a room which was as different from his earlier cell as possible. There was a comfortable looking bed in a corner, a leather sofa, an attached bathroom and to Aaditya's delight, a TV and a mini-bar.

'Now, this is five star treatment.'

Tanya smiled.

'I told them you would like this better than the sterile room you had been given earlier. Get some rest, I'll come back later.'

Aaditya sat down on the bed. He was tempted to turn on the TV and find out what was happening in the world, but fatigue got the better of him, and before he knew it, he was fast asleep.

He was awakened by a light knock on his door. 'Come in,' he called, expecting to see Tanya there. Instead, Kartik's father walked in. Aaditya involuntarily stepped back, in part because the last time he had met this gentleman, he had been knocked out in a single punch, and in part due to his guest's fearsome appearance. His hair was still matted, though now tied in a top-knot on his head. His face was still smeared in ash, and he was naked to the waist down, wearing only tiger striped fitting pants. If anything, this made him look even more fearsome as it brought into focus his rippling muscles and the many scars crisscrossing his torso. As if sensing Aaditya's fears, he held up both hands, palms facing Aaditya, indicating that he posed no threat.

'They told me that you would be summoned soon enough, but I just came to say thank you.'

'Thank me for what?'

The man smiled. 'For saving Kartik's life. We all know you could have flown to Delhi if you wanted to.'

'What would you have done if I had decided to escape?'

The man smiled, though his eyes hardened. 'You would never have made it. Indra would have destroyed your vimana. But still, you made a brave choice.'

Aaditya flinched at the sobering thought that he had escaped death by a whisker. His guest now came closer, a genuine smile spreading across his face.

'Forget all that for now, because I come to you as a father who

owes you his son's life.'

Aaditya took the outstretched hand and shook it.

'What is your name?'

The man sat down on the sofa. 'My name is Shiva. Now, let's have a celebratory drink.'

Aaditya opened the mini-bar and found it stocked with bottles of Blue Label, Smirnoff and Bacardi Gold. 'Someone has expensive tastes in drink', he said.

Shiva produced a small hip flask from his pocket.

'Help yourself, I have my own drink.'

Aaditya picked up a Coke saying he didn't drink alcohol. Shiva took a sip of his drink and laughed.

`What's so funny?'

'I had gathered you used to steal drinks from your father's cabinet, and now you claim not to drink. Come on, today you can indulge a little. I have a lot to celebrate-join me! Take a sip of my drink. It has no alcohol in it but packs a punch.'

Once again, Aaditya had no idea how these people knew so much about him, but he did need something stiffer than Coke to settle his nerves. He allowed Shiva to pour him a drink. Two drinks down, he had loosened up enough to ask what was on his mind. 'Who the hell are you guys? CIA? Your names sound Indian and you have all this weird technology and this base in the Himalayas.'

Shiva smiled. 'No, we're not the CIA. That much I can assure you.'

'So who are you? And who is that snake-eyed bastard I seem to keep running into?'

Shiva's eyes hardened again with a brief flash of anger, then he smiled again.

'Aadi, do you want to go back home to your life?'

Aaditya was a bit taken aback by the question.

'Of course, why do you ask?'

'Because then the less you know the better it is for you. Now, let's just see if you drink as well as they say you fly.'

As Aaditya rapidly discovered, punching him was not the only way Shiva could knock him out. Several drinks down, Shiva still seemed to be sober while he was feeling distinctly happy. He didn't quite remember when, but he passed out in a dreamless slumber, and was awakened by a light touch on his shoulder.

Still groggy, he opened his eyes and found Tanya leaning over him, a broad smile on her face. 'I should have warned you. Never try and outdrink Shiva. Now get up and come with me.'

Aaditya sat up, his head feeling like it would split. He had no idea what drink Shiva had given him, but it sure was potent.

'Where are we going?'

'To meet the folks who run the show here.'

***

Tanya led Aaditya down a long corridor. When she reached its end, she spoke aloud, 'He is here.'

A wall slid open, and Aaditya was about to enter when he hesitated.

'Tanya, won't you come with me?'

She smiled, seeing the worry on his face.

'There's nothing to worry about. You showed great courage and did the right thing in bringing Kartik back. That counts for a lot with them. Now go in there, you'll be just fine.'

To Aaditya's surprise, she leaned over and hugged him. 'For luck, and in case we don't meet again,' she whispered in his ears. Wondering what she meant, he was about to go in when she stopped him. 'Aadi, when you meet them, just keep an open mind. Some people find it difficult to understand who they may be.'

Aaditya entered the room, which was large and circular, and ringed with chairs, much like a conference or meeting room. There seemed to be no lights on, and with the only light coming from the open door behind him, he could not make out the details of those seated in the room. It seemed to be a conference room, but there was no table or indeed any of the other trappings he had associated with corporate meeting rooms, like projectors, screens or notepads. Instead, in the middle of the room, suspended just a few inches above the ground, there were a number of holographic screens. As soon as the door slid shut behind him, the screens disappeared and lights came on. The first to speak was Narada.

'Aadi, we have met, but let me introduce myself properly. I am Narada Muni and I handle Intelligence here.'

Next to him was the ash-covered man, looking none the worse for wear from his drinking bout.

'And I am Shiva. I lead our Special Forces.'

The woman he had met in the fracas that had started this all was seated next to Shiva. She was wearing a red-bordered white suit, and she smiled as she introduced herself, 'I am Durga, and I never did thank you for trying to help me.'

Some connections were forming in Aaditya's mind, when the last three men there introduced themselves. The tall, muscular man with a beard spoke next. 'We have met in the air, Aadi. I am Indra, the Military commander here.'

Next to him was a man with a dark complexion, who seemed to be playing with a disc-shaped object in his hand. 'And I am Vishnu. I

am the administrative head here. Think of me as the Chief Operating Officer, if that analogy works for you.'

What the hell was going on? Their names…they seemed like the names of Hindu gods. Were they trying to mess with his mind, or just hiding their true identities?

The last man, who looked much older than the rest, with long white hair and a white beard, spoke. 'My young friend, I am Brahma. I am in charge here and I wanted to meet you and thank you for what you did before you leave.'

Aaditya wasn't sure he had heard it right.

'So you mean I can still go home?'

Brahma smiled.

'Or course. What did you expect? We never keep anyone against their will, and while you have seen a lot more than you should have, the only request I have is that you try and forget what happened over the last few days. We have already sent out communication to our adversaries that you were caught up purely by accident and know nothing of any value. So please just stick to your life as it was.'

It sounded more like a plea than a threat. Aaditya asked why they were letting him go if they wanted him to keep quiet. This time Vishnu spoke.

'Because sometimes taking a risk to do the right thing is better than doing what's expedient but wrong. You should know that-that is what you did. And if we did not, we would be no different from our enemies.'

Indra got up and approached Aaditya. He held Aaditya's shoulder in a friendly gesture though his strength made Aaditya wince.

'Aadi, our enemies show no such compassion, as you have seen. If you try and share anything of what happened, they will track you down to get to us. That will cause some complications for us, but you will not survive. So for your own sake, listen to what Brahma said.'

Aaditya nodded. Unsure of what to do next he began to walk towards the door. Then he stopped and turned.

'Can I ask a couple of questions?'

Brahma nodded.

'What was that cylinder your enemies were after?'

Durga answered, 'They wanted it so badly because it could give them insights into how our vimanas work. My vimana had broken down and I was waiting for Shiva to come and help when they ambushed me.'

'Okay, if your vimanas fly around so freely without being detected, I'm assuming you have stealth of some kind. But why don't more people see them with their naked eyes?'

Indra shook his head, 'Nice try, but as we said, the less you know

the better. Anything else?'

Aaditya paused, but then figuring he had nothing to lose since he was on his way home anyway, he blurted out, 'What's with the names? I imagine you'll never tell me what your organization really is, but why pick code names from Hindu mythology?'

To his surprise, they looked a bit perplexed. Then Shiva broke out laughing and the others joined in. Narada, a broad smile on his face, came to Aaditya and said, 'Let's just say that we've been around a while in these parts and we have come to like these names, so we made them our own. Now come on, we'll get you a ride home.'

Aaditya was at the door when Kartik burst in from a side door. Aaditya was shocked at seeing him so soon after the battle, and with no apparent signs of injury.

'A US Air Force F-22 has gone down in the desert over Iraq. They're calling it an accident during a routine training mission.'

Narada gestured with a hand and a holographic screen came up. In one corner, playing in a small box was CNN, showing the Breaking News.

'Ganesha, what do we know? A real accident or our friends at it again?'

As if on cue, a young man walked in. Unlike the others who looked like athletes or soldiers, this newcomer was short and potbellied. He seemed to have unusually large ears, and wore old-fashioned wire rimmed spectacles.

'What do you think? I hacked into the Pentagon servers, and they have no clue what happened. The plane just disappeared.'

Aaditya hugged the wall, realizing that in the chaos, everyone had forgotten about him, assuming that he had gone out of the room. Indra motioned towards the display and a world map came up, a few dots scattered on it.

'These are the aircraft we know they were responsible for destroying before 2000, because they stumbled upon them, or perhaps Maya and his goons just wanted to indulge their bloodlust. This is what has happened since then.'

The map now filled with dots, and a few began blinking. Durga spoke up.

'Many more, as if they are stepping up on purpose, but also so many missing and never found.' The display now showed only a dozen or so blinking lights.

'And all of them are top of the line aircraft in the Earth's major air forces-Rafales in France, Eurofighters in England, Blackjack bombers in Russia, the Su-30 from India and now this. What are they up to?' asked Indra to nobody in particular.

'If you ask me, they are preparing for war, trying to learn about

these craft before they strike. Remember that their kritika vimanas are not much more advanced than these aircraft,' said Brahma.

'So Kalki will fulfill the prophecy,' said Vishnu, with venom in his voice.

Shiva almost spat out his words, 'Prophecy! He will rule over a pile of ash. Has he learnt nothing from last time?'

Aaditya had no idea what they were talking about, but something in their conversation struck a chord.

'A Su-30MKI of the Indian Air Force?' he asked aloud, to nobody in particular.

Everyone in the room seemed to freeze and the display disappeared. Narada was the first to react and came towards him, 'Aadi, we didn't know you were still here. Come on, we'll get you to your flight.'

Aaditya shrugged off his touch and walked towards the group. Secret organization or not, fierce unknown warriors or not, one could not walk away from some things. He spoke, his voice rising, as he struggled to come to grips with what he thought he had uncovered.

'The Indian Air Force has lost only one Sukhoi whose wreckage was never traced.'

Everyone looked at him in silence as he continued. 'That plane was flown by my father.'

He looked at Brahma to see his reaction, but in the old man's eyes, he saw only sympathy, no surprise.

'You knew….'

Brahma held up his hand.

'Aadi, your father's plane was taken by the same enemies we fight. Yes, we knew that. But you still need not get involved. Go home and get on with your life.'

Aaditya almost screamed, his voice choking with emotion. 'Go back and sit at a desk in college and pretend that I don't know who killed my father? Pretend that he died in an accident, when I now know he was murdered by the same bastards I've seen over the last few days? No sir, I cannot do that.'

Shiva walked up and held Aaditya around his shoulder, as if comforting him.

'Aadi, all you will get is pain. Once you learn more, I don't know how you will ever be able to cope with being back home.'

'At least give me that choice. It's my father we are talking about.'

Brahma motioned for the others to step back.

'Very well then. Come over here and listen to what really happened to your father.'

SIX

Hawk One en route to waypoint three. Hawk Two has some FOD and is coming home.

Hearing his father's voice again was like an electric shock for Aaditya. Everyone else in the room had stepped back, leaving Aaditya alone in front of the holographic display. He watched a blue dot representing his father's plane move across the green tinged landscape. He knew that his father's wingman had aborted the sortie due to what was called in aviation parlance 'foreign object damage', which turned out to be a small bird hitting one of his jet intakes. The next ten minutes were routine reports from his father on the progress of his mission, which has been to test out flight characteristics of his aircraft after being loaded with the newly inducted Brahmos cruise missile. Then came the first sign of trouble.

I see something emerging from the water. Do we have a submarine in the area?

Hawk One, negative. Please confirm it is a submersible.

Going down to take a closer look.

It's large and spherical. Not a submarine for sure.

Hawk One, confirm your last transmission, please.

I see two craft taking off from its surface and coming towards me. Radar shows negative.

Hawk One, can you ID the bogeys?

They look like…..saucers, one has a red tip. They are flanking me now. Intent seems hostile, request authorization to take evasive measures.

Then there was silence. Aaditya fell to his knees. Narada made to come towards him but Brahma waved him back.

'They said it was an accident. Why did they lie?'

'Because no government likes to make such incidents public,' said Brahma.

Aaditya's mind was in turmoil. He had no idea what he should do. 'Aadi, perhaps it was fate that got you involved in all this, but we had no idea whatsoever of who you were till you posted online about the Delhi incident and we had to start doing background checks. Believe me, we would rather have not got you involved at all.'

Shiva knelt down beside Aaditya. 'I am a father. I nearly lost a son today, so I feel your pain. But I also think it's best that you get back to your life. You're young and have your whole life ahead of you.'

'A life spent knowing who my father's murderers are. No, I cannot do that.'

Indra raised Aaditya up.

'Son, what do you want to do?'

'I want to help you destroy those murderers.'

'Don't be foolish. What could you possibly do to help us?'

'Let me fly,' he pleaded.

'That's impossible!'

'I flew one of your vimanas back here, didn't I?'

Brahma intervened and motioned for Indra to back down.

'Aadi, you're angry, and I can understand that, but take some time to think it over. If you really want to stay and help us, we will not stop you, but don't be reckless. Your flying the vimana back was impressive but flying in combat against Maya and others like him is totally different.'

Aaditya was about to protest when Shiva spoke up, 'Look son, we don't just fly around. It gets up close and dirty, as you have seen. And there, you wouldn't last a minute.'

Aaditya thought Shiva was referring to his handicap, and he exploded in anger.

'Yes, I have a damned handicap that robbed me of my dreams, but if nothing else, I'll fly one of your vimanas in a suicide mission.'

At this point Brahma ordered everyone to disperse and told Aaditya to get some rest, saying they would talk again in a few hours when he had had more time to think things over with a cool head.

Aaditya was stewing in his room when Tanya came in and sat down on the sofa next to him.

'Aadi, I'm so sorry. I had no idea about your father.'

'All I want is to get a chance to avenge his death. That's all I want.'

Tanya placed a hand on his arm. 'Are you sure you want to stay?'

'Yes.'

Tanya sighed. 'Aadi, you would not be the first one to say that.'

Aaditya turned to face her, as she continued, 'Many more have come in contact with them over the years. Lost travellers, crashed pilots, accident survivors, and explorers. At first, many of them want to stay, especially when they guess what's going on. But inevitably, they cannot bear being away from their normal lives and accept the full reality of what they're involved in. Without being mentally prepared for this, the pressure gets to them. Some go mad, others beg to return. When they are released, their description of what they've seen makes them objects of ridicule or worse. That's why they are so hesitant to have you stay.'

'What's your story, Tanya? You aren't like them, and you clearly haven't gone mad.'

Tanya looked away wistfully, as if bringing back memories she had not thought of for a long time.

'My story is different. My family was killed in a plane crash over the Atlantic Ocean, and I was the only survivor. One of the vimanas saw a five-year-old girl floating on a life raft and picked me up. They tried to send me back, but the problem was I had no family other than the one I lost. In the months I was here, they got attached to me, and being a kid, my mind was open enough to take in who they were. So I grew up around them, they educated me, and when I was older, they offered me a chance to go back. By then, this was home.'

Aaditya was looking at her in wonder.

'So, you never wanted to go back?'

Tanya smiled.

'This was the only life I really remembered, and over time, I made myself useful, serving as the contact for anyone like you who happened to stumble upon them.'

'Tanya, who are these guys? Their names…their aircraft…they certainly are not the CIA, nor do they look like any other government organization.'

'That only they can tell you. Aadi, can I say something?'

'Yeah, of course.'

Tanya was holding both his hands.

'I would be happy if you stayed. I have nobody I can relate to, nobody else here who will grow old like me. One day I will be an old woman and they will still be what they are. But do think hard about your decision, it will not just change your life, it will become your life.'

Aaditya had no idea what she was talking about. But he was sure he could not just walk away after learning what had happened to his father.

'Tanya, believe me, I wish I had nothing to do with all this. I wish I could just get on with my life. But for better or for worse, I am here, and now I cannot walk away. I'll stay, whatever that means, and try and do something. I threw away the dreams my father had for me, but now I will not let him down.'

As he spoke, he banged his fist against his right leg. Tanya caught his hand and looked him in the eye. 'Aadi, you're a better man than you give yourself credit for. Now, if you really want to stay, I imagine Brahma will want to talk to you soon.'

An hour later, Aaditya was back in the conference room, except this time there was nobody else other than him and Brahma. The old man asked him to sit down on one of the chairs and sat down next to him.

'We are forced to keep our existence a closely guarded secret. But if someone chances upon us, we believe in giving nothing but the full truth. Do you know why?'

Aaditya shook his head.

'Because the day is coming when we may have to reveal ourselves. And the last thing I want is for your people to mistake our secrecy for hostile intent. Are you really ready to hear the truth? I ask you one last time, because once they hear it, many people wish they had not.'

'I'm ready.'

Brahma motioned towards the centre of the room, where a holographic display materialized. It showed the Earth as viewed from space. It filled the screen rapidly, growing from a distant blue dot to a blue and green sphere ringed by clouds, where Aaditya could begin to make out features of the continents.

'What a beautiful sight. Aadi, do you know what that is?' Brahma asked.

'The Earth of course.'

'Yes, of course it is. But this is more than just a video of the Earth from space. It is a recording that I cherish dearly.'

Aaditya saw the wistful look in the old man's eyes and wondered where he was going with this.

'This, Aadi, is a recording of the first time I saw your planet.'

Aaditya's head swiveled towards Brahma in shock.

What did he mean?

'Yes, Aaditya. This was when I and my crew first came to your planet.'

A million questions were racing through Aaditya's mind, and not knowing where to start, he blurted out, 'So you're aliens?'

Brahma smiled.

'So many people say that. What a curious word: *Alien*. Considering how long we've been here, one would have hoped for more hospitality.'

He laughed at his own joke, and Aaditya stared at him, wondering if the old man was crazy or trying to tell him a tall tale. Oblivious to Aaditya's incredulity, Brahma continued.

'What you choose to believe is of course up to you. I can but share the truth. This, Aadi is a recording of our first descent to Earth.'

Aaditya turned to the image again. It showed what seemed to be North America, but as the ground loomed even closer, Aaditya was mystified by one thing.

'I see no lights, no cities, just barren earth. Why is that?'

Brahma turned towards Aaditya with a smile.

'You see none of those, my son, because this recording was made 15,000 years ago.'

***

Aaditya sat in stunned silence as Brahma continued with his tale.

'We are part of an alliance that seeks out planets that can harbour intelligent life, and we nudge them along till they develop to a level of self-awareness where we can ask them to join our alliance.'

'An alliance. Like a military alliance?'

Brahma shook his head. 'No, far from it. It is an alliance that shares knowledge and resources; that seeks to nurture that most precious thing in our universe-life.'

A map of the Indian subcontinent came into view.

'We first landed near what you today know as India, then set up bases across the world.'

Red dots emerged across multiple locations on the map-Egypt, South America, India and Europe.

'At that time, we found that your people were barely entering the phase of what you consider civilization today. It was far too early for us to make contact. We debated that last point, but the question for me was sealed when some of your people chanced upon us and began to think of us as gods.'

Realization dawned on Aaditya.

'That explains your names. Those are all names of Hindu gods.'

'People in other regions gave us other names, but having landed here first, we adopted these names over time. You know, Aadi, we should have never stayed. What we should have done was go back, and report that it was still too early to visit Earth.'

'Then why did you stay?'

'Because some of us broke our faith.'

The angry response had come from Indra, who had walked into the room flanked by Shiva and Vishnu.

'One of us got greedy. Seeing the primitive stage of development here, he decided to enslave your people and rule as a false God. He built monuments to his vanity and caused untold suffering. He began to corrupt others in our crew with promises of power.'

The holographic image now showed slaves pulling huge stone blocks towards a giant half-finished pyramid. Vishnu took up the tale.

'We tied to reason with him, pleaded with him to not go down this path, but he was beyond reasoning. When we threatened force, he took his many followers and set up a base here.'

A dot glowed in the Mediterranean Sea.

'We knew him and his crew as Ashwins. Indian mythology calls them Asuras and we became known as the Devas. The land they hid in is known to your people as Atlantis.'

Aaditya's eyes began to roll over, and noticing his reaction, Brahma stopped.

'So you don't believe me?'

'I'm sorry but you expect me to believe that you're 15,000-year-old aliens? That sounds too far out for me.'

Brahma wiped his hand and the holographic display disappeared.

'That is your choice. But what I can tell you is that if you do not believe us, I really don't see any point in you staying here. How can you help us when you don't even believe in us?'

Indra now spoke. 'As Tanya may have told you, we initially welcomed people who stumbled upon us, since we hoped they could act as a bridge to your people when the time comes to reveal ourselves. But nobody really stayed. If you want to stay, we would be happy to try again, but as Brahma said, you need to fully understand what you're involved in.'

Aaditya pleaded with him, 'Look, I would love to believe you, but this is so weird that I'd rather believe you're some kind of secret government organization that's saying this to prevent me from knowing the truth.'

Vishnu asked the others to step back. 'Aadi's stakes in this are much more personal than for anyone before him, and let us not forget that Kartik lives today because of him. So, let me take him on a trip and try and show him some of our history at close quarters.'

Five minutes later, Aaditya was in the hangar, in front of a large vimana that had a beak like a hawk and wings drawn on either side along with sharp talons. Vishnu asked Aaditya to get into the cockpit. 'This, Aadi, is my vimana, the *Garuda*. Put one of these on as well.'

He handed Aaditya an earpiece similar to the one he had taken from Kartik. In an instant, they were out of the hangar doors and Aaditya felt himself flattened against the seat as the vimana accelerated nearly vertically. When it stabilized in level flight, Aaditya saw the holographic display showing the vimana at an altitude of 100,000 feet and a speed of more than five thousand kilometres per hour. Vishnu looked at his expression and smiled.

'*Garuda* is not even being stretched here, but I thought for starters, I'd lay your doubts to rest about this being an aircraft from Earth. You know your planes, so tell me, is there any craft you can think of that could do this. Or this?'

Aaditya shook his head mutely as the vimana accelerated to six thousand kilometres per hour and climbed to the very edge of space. Aaditya found his breath being taken away by the sight he saw-pitch black space above, and the Earth far below.

Vishnu kept talking, taking up the story where Brahma had left it.

'For some years, the Ashwins were content to live in their land, and rule over their domains in Egypt and South America, and we kept trying for a peaceful solution. But perhaps we waited too long. They

mistook our patience for weakness, and began a campaign of conquest. We were always few, perhaps a hundred of us, and a similar number of them, so they needed foot soldiers to occupy and hold land. Know how they did that?'

Aaditya shook his head, as an image came up on the display in front of him. It was that of the kind of men he had encountered at the Old Fort and on his roof-large, dark, and with the ridged forehead.

'*Daityas*,' Vishnu continued, 'They took some of the early proto-human species and created cloned monsters. Strong, ruthless and obedient, but not very smart. With those demons, they unleashed their reign of terror. They sided with human dictators, promising them power and helping with these demons and their technologies, but in reality making them slaves.'

The display now showed vimanas flying high overhead, as a medieval looking army laid siege to a fort. Aaditya interrupted Vishnu. 'If this is true, and they were interfering in human affairs with these daityas and their vimanas, someone would have noticed it.'

Vishnu smiled.

'They did. In a way, we are lucky that you modern humans have such short memories and that you've come to trust nothing but what you discover for yourselves. Otherwise, our existence would have been no secret.'

He pointed to the display where text emerged in a language Aaditya did not recognize, and then dissolved into its English translation.

Vimanas, decked and equipped according to rule, looked like heavenly structures in the sky. . borne away they looked like highly beautiful flights of birds.

'That's from the Indian epic Mahabharata, written some three thousand years ago.'

Another quote appeared.

The Puspaka Vimana that resembles the sun and belongs to my brother, was brought by the powerful Ravan; that aerial and excellent car, going everywhere at will, is ready for thee. That car, resembling a bright cloud in the sky, is in the city of Lanka.

'That's from your Ramayana, written even earlier. And it isn't just your people who recorded it. Another quote.'

A rushing windy great thundercloud like flying craft flew out of the north. The vehicle had the appearance of brilliant glowing fire all around it and the centre of the illumination the vehicle was polished metal.

'That's Ezekiel speaking, in the Bible.'

Seeing Aaditya's expression, Vishnu added with a smile, 'If you don't believe me, Google it, as you say nowadays.'

'Did you fight these Ashwins then?'

'Oh we had to. We couldn't let them continue. Not after they crossed a threshold we never imagined they would.'

'What did they do?'

In response, Vishnu took the vimana into a gut-wrenching dive and sped towards the Earth.

'Look down. What do you see?'

Aaditya saw a lake…no, as he looked closer, he could see that the water was contained in a depression of some kind.

'Looks like one of those meteorite craters that you see on Discovery Channel.'

Vishnu nodded.

'Looks like one but it isn't. This is in Lonar, just a few hundred kilometres from Mumbai, and the crater you see is over six thousand feet in diameter and was formed over 12,000 years ago. It looks like a meteorite crater but no evidence has been found of an impact. Do you know why?'

Aaditya shrugged his shoulders.

'Because it's not a meteorite crater at all. It is the impact point of the first use of nuclear weapons in the history of Earth.'

***

Aaditya sat wordlessly as Vishnu took his vimana on a trip crisscrossing many continents at speeds well in excess of five thousand kilometres per hour, pausing only to show him a site of interest before moving to the next.

'The Ashwins used the nuclear weapon to support one of their human client states in a war, and then repeated it several times. It emerged that the first use was executed on the orders of one the Ashwin generals, a wonderful specimen called Maya, whom I believe you know well. When we sought to intervene to stop this madness, they used nuclear weapons against us.'

Aaditya involuntarily clenched his fist at the memory of the snake-eyed monster and also the fact that his father's last transmission had mentioned a red-tipped craft like the one Maya piloted.

'So many years later, the traces remain. In Rajasthan, near Jodhpur, there is still a mile wide area of high radioactivity. In the Middle East, there are peaks that seem to have been cleaved off, and their tops still show radioactive traces. Look below you and see the blackened top.'

'And I suppose that this use of nuclear weapons is also recorded?'

Vishnu shook his head, as if in mock despair. 'Ever the skeptic. But don't take my word for it. This is what the Mahabharata says.'

The holographic display glowed with a new set of characters.

A single projectile
Charged with all the power of the Universe.
An incandescent column of smoke and flame
As bright as the thousand suns
Rose in all its splendor…
…it was an unknown weapon,
An iron thunderbolt,
A gigantic messenger of death,
Which reduced to ashes
The entire race of the Vrishnis and the Andhakas.

Aaditya was silent for a while.

'So you didn't retaliate?'

Vishnu began to set a course back to base as he responded.

'Oh we retaliated all right. We obliterated them. First we wiped out their major base in the Middle East-an episode that has gone down in human folklore as Sodom and Gomorrah. They had set up one of their generals in Lanka and we destroyed him, and then unable to break through their defenses, we used nuclear explosions to create giant tidal waves that destroyed their main citadel. And thus the legend of Atlantis was born.'

'And then?'

Aaditya could now see the Himalayan peaks over the horizon, as Vishnu responded.

'And then, we stepped back and looked at what we had unleashed. The Earth was devastated, the nuclear winter brought on a new ice age, and we left, vowing to return when the Earth was indeed more ready in terms of its evolution for us to make contact again.'

'But…'

Vishnu silenced him.

'I cannot give you all the answers in one flight. If you choose to remain, you will get all of them gradually.'

The vimana landed in a few minutes and Aaditya was back in his room, thinking over all that he had seen and heard. There was a knock on the door. It was Tanya.

'I heard about your trip. They must feel for your situation, otherwise I've never seen them take so much effort.'

Aaditya sat down beside Tanya.

'It all sounds so….'

'Crazy?' Tanya volunteered.

'Well, yeah.'

'Sometimes, Aadi, if there is no other feasible alternative than what you see with your own eyes, no matter how unexpected or improbable it seems, it is perhaps the truth.'

Aaditya turned towards her.

'I didn't realize you were a philosopher.'

She smiled. 'Hardly, but I've seen too many people discover this and then not be able to cope with it, or worse, use the knowledge to try and get fame when they go back.'

Aaditya just sat there quietly for a minute, still coming to grips with everything he had just learned. He felt Tanya's hand close over his.

'Aadi, I know just how tough it is to lose one's family, so I can understand your pain. If you do stay, and just want someone to talk to, I'm always here.'

Aaditya looked at her and smiled.

'Thanks. At least I have you to chat with and relate to. It must have been tough for you, being….alone here.'

Aaditya saw her face darken and mentally kicked himself for saying the wrong thing.

'Hey, I'm sorry if I said something wrong.'

Tanya quickly composed herself.

'I guess I'm used to it now. This is the only life I know. So while you were dating girls in college, I was handling lost explorers and half-crazy adventurers.'

It was said with a smile, but Aaditya thought he heard something more.

'That's too bad, if we had been in the same college, or if I had met you somewhere else, I would have asked you out for sure.'

'Why don't you?' she said with a sly smile.

'I mean, where would we go? To the hangar?'

Tanya got up, a twinkle in her eyes.

'The Devas don't just wage war against evil and fly around in their vimanas. They know how to throw a mean party as well.'

'You've gotta be kidding.'

'They'll only let you in there if you're staying.'

Aaditya hadn't yet digested everything he had seen, but he knew here was an attractive girl literally asking him to ask her out.

'Let's go.'

They walked together down a corridor, then entered a room that took Aaditya's breath away. There were flashing lights and music. Aaditya found it surreal, but they were playing Floyd. Tanya nudged him.

'They like this music a lot.'

Shiva was in a corner, drinking from his hip flask, next to Kartik who seemed to be nursing his own drink. Indra was seated at a bar where a small bartender was mixing a drink for him. The bartender was so short that only the top of his bald head was visible above the bar. Narada was sitting by himself in a corner, strumming a stringed

instrument.

Tanya grinned. 'Come on, try it.'

The bartender handed Aaditya a glass of cream-coloured liquid. When he took a sip, he realized it was the same drink Shiva had poured for him. It was sweet, but he already knew how potent it could be.

'Welcome to the wonders of Soma,' laughed Indra

Just then the music changed to a fast beat, and Shiva leapt on to the dance floor, moving faster and with more rhythm than Aaditya had ever seen.

'Care to dance?' asked Tanya.

Aaditya, feeling a bit light-headed after his drink, agreed, but as they were about to enter the dance floor, he stopped.

'Tanya, I'm not much of a dancer…'

Tanya hushed him.

'There's more than one way to dance.'

The two of them, oblivious to everything around them, held each other as they slow danced. As Aaditya held her close to him and looked into her eyes, he tried to remind himself. *This is not the right time or the right place, and for God's sake, she lives with aliens.*

But, in the battle between mind and heart, as usually happens, the heart won out. That evening, they left together. He did not ask her to. They had been holding hands, and when it came time to leave, it just felt right to leave hand in hand. They walked for a long time, talking, and then they stopped in front of Aaditya's room. As he faced her and looked into her eyes, without thinking about it, he leaned down and kissed her, a single tentative kiss. He pulled back, wondering if he had done something wrong. But then she looked up and smiled at him. It melted away all his uncertainties. It told him that in the midst of all the chaos he found himself involved in, this was the one thing that made sense.

The next morning, he went back to the conference room, having asked for a meeting with Brahma. He found Brahma studying something on a small holographic display hovering above his palm. He looked up as Aaditya entered, and the display disappeared.

'So, my son, what have you decided?'

Aaditya spoke with a newfound certainty. 'There is a lot I don't understand yet, and honestly, a lot that does not yet make sense. But it's clear that if I ever want a chance at avenging my father's death, it has to be with your help.'

Brahma beamed with pleasure.

'I am glad you made that decision, but you do realize that you will not be piloting a vimana into combat, don't you?'

'I do, but I will start by helping in any way I can and then one day, earn the trust to do just that.'

Durga came into the room, and stood just behind Aaditya. 'Are you sure there's no other reason for your wanting to stay?'

Aaditya turned around, not knowing what to say, but in her expression he saw no mocking, only a genuine smile of warmth.

'Aadi, we all see Tanya like our own adopted daughter. But one day soon, we will reveal ourselves, and then she needs a life back among humans. I cannot think of anyone better to help ease her into that than you.'

Brahma was about to go back to the display on his palm, when Aaditya interrupted him. 'There's just one thing I wanted to know. Vishnu told me that you all left after the nuclear wars, so why are you still fighting and whom are you fighting against?'

Brahma looked up.

'We are fighting the same enemy, Aadi. The same one who brought catastrophe to Earth so many years ago with his greed. He and a few of his generals, including Maya, escaped, as we were to find out later.'

He motioned to the centre of the room, where the large display reappeared showing footage of a fleet of large ships approaching the Earth from space.

'We monitored Earth's development, and though you suffered the growing pangs and pains of all civilizations, two hundred years ago, we were sure that you were on the verge of reaching a level of technological and intellectual development where we could contact you. So we came back, with many more of us this time.'

The display now showed a barren frozen wasteland.

'To ease our way in, we set up base under the snowfields of Siberia, where there was no trace of humans for thousands of miles around.'

Then the display showed a bright light streaking through the night sky, a flash of light so bright that Aaditya had to avert his eyes. When he turned back to the display, he saw a mushroom cloud forming over the snow-covered landscape.

'What your scientists call the Tunguska Event of 1908: a gigantic explosion in remote Siberia that they still have not been able to explain. But we know only too well what caused it. A nuclear explosion 1000 times more destructive than the first human nuclear bomb dropped over Hiroshima. An explosion caused by our returning arch-enemy. Many of us perished, but several of us were aloft in our vimanas and we regrouped at this new hidden base. And our struggle resumed.'

'Who is this guy?'

Brahma motioned for the display to go away.

'Someone we once held dear. One of us. Your culture knows him by many names, Shaitan, Satan, and the Devil. I know him by the name I gave him once as a proud father. Kalki.'

SEVEN

'Aadi, we've already told you that we cannot let you fly in combat. You survived the last time you were up in a vimana, but playing video games and flying against Maya and the other Asuras are two very different things.'

'Then teach me,' Aaditya pleaded with Indra.

Once again, Indra refused. Aaditya returned to his room, and found Tanya there, who greeted him with a big hug.

'You don't give up, do you?'

Aaditya grinned. 'I may not be as strong or as fast as these Devas, but I sure as hell will prove that I'm more stubborn than any of them.'

It had been three days since Aaditya had told Brahma that he would stay. Three days since Tanya and he had spent virtually every spare minute together. Three days in which he had gone and made the same request to Indra a grand total of fifteen times. That afternoon, just after they had lunch, a message flashed on the holographic screen that served as his communicator to the Devas. The message read: *Come to the conference room. We may have good news for you.*

'Oh my God, maybe they have agreed to let me fly after all.'

Aaditya rushed as fast as he could, arriving slightly out of breath. He found Brahma and Indra there, together with Ganesha.

'Can I fly?'

Brahma laughed, 'No, you cannot fly.'

Seeing Aaditya's crestfallen expression, he spoke more gently, 'Aadi, the reason you cannot fly is not because I don't believe that, given the right training, you could master a vimana. We cannot spare the time or resources to train you. Kalki is intensifying his activities, and we need all our resources to understand what he's doing. But I do have an important job for you. Go with Ganesha.'

Aaditya was disappointed, yet excited at being given some work. So he followed Ganesha. The potbellied Deva seemed to always be smiling, and had a voracious appetite, picking out sweets from his pockets and munching on them as they walked.

'Do you want one?' he asked, offering a bar of chocolate to Aaditya.

'Thanks, I'm quite full. By the way, what exactly am I going to be doing?'

Ganesha motioned over his shoulder for Aaditya to follow. They entered a room where the walls were covered in holographic screens, with a seat in front of each. There was only one person in the room, a thin girl who looked like a geeky schoolgirl, with ponytails and thick

glasses.

'That's Lakshmi. She's our money person.' whispered Ganesha.

'Money?'

'We need tons of it. To repair our vimanas, liquid Mercury for their propulsion, other materials for our weapons, to pay informants, you name it, it all costs money. So she runs several shell companies, trading in options and futures, and rakes in billions a year. Narada uses his contacts to get material transported to private airfields, where we pick them up. We are the biggest Fortune 500 corporation nobody knows about.'

Lakshmi just nodded as Aaditya passed her, and got back to whatever she had been doing. Ganesha asked Aaditya to sit down.

'The same holds for Kalki and his gang. So, part of our job is to track down his operations and shut them down. That's where you can help.'

'What do I do?'

Ganesha sat down on the next chair.

'Laskhmi handles the financial intelligence. I do the tactical part, trying to find out what Kalki's up to by ferreting out information, making connections, trying to get a picture of his latest mischief. You're knee deep in defence and aviation matters, and you seem to be a regular on forums where this kind of stuff gets picked up, so you have a headstart over a civilian who wouldn't known a Sukhoi 30 from a Sukhoi 27.'

If it was meant as a compliment, it sure worked, so Aaditya asked what he needed to do.

'Intelligence, my boy. Intelligence.'

Aaditya was still not clear what was expected of him, so Ganesha laid it out. Basically Aaditya was expected to go through literally thousands of pieces of information-news reports, intelligence summaries from the world's agencies that Ganesha had hacked into, even forums dedicated to conspiracy theories. He would have to keep searching for a few keywords such as 'unidentified flying objects', 'unknown attackers' and so on, and then feed the results to Ganesha.

It was mind-numbingly repetitive and Aaditya soon saw that Ganesha was several times faster than him, so he began to wonder if he was really doing something useful or if they just wanted to keep him occupied. After a while, it really got to him, so he turned to Ganesha. 'Hey, mind if I ask you something?'

'Go ahead,' responded Ganesha without even turning to face Aaditya.

'Look, I've been here two hours, and I feel kind of silly just going through this junk and forwarding it to you. Does this ever help?'

Ganesha swiveled around in his chair to respond.

'This is where the action is. Sure, the flying and blowing things up is glamorous, but without the right intelligence, we're as good as blind. You have it so easy now, with all the information flowing through the networks.'

'What do you mean?'

'Fifty years ago, Kalki used human agents he'd bribed or threatened to do his bidding. So we'd have to track them down and neutralize them. Messy work. The way we play the game now is different, but the game's the same.'

'What game?'

'Oh man, the game Kalki loves playing, and I must add, is very good at. The game of temptation. For an ambitious bastard like him, he has one big problem. Do you know what that is?'

Aaditya just nodded encouragement, wanting to learn as much as he could, as Ganesha continued, 'There's maybe fifty Asuras left. Between them and the hundreds of dimwit daityas he has, he can't really conquer the Earth all on his own. Maybe he could a hundred years ago, but not now. You have nukes and as far as his vimanas go, they are but one or two generations ahead of your latest fighters. So you know what he does?'

Once again, Aaditya figured it was a rhetorical question, so he waited for Ganesha to continue.

'He divides and conquers. He pits one nation against another, hoping you weaken your nations enough to give him a chance. And you ask if this intelligence gathering serves a purpose! Hell, sitting in this very chair, I discovered how he was leaking knowledge on rocketry to the Nazis. We put an end to that, for sure.'

Suitably educated and chastened, Aaditya got back to work. After four hours, his eyes were blurry and he desperately needed a break, so he went back to his room. Tanya was there, though it looked like she was about to leave. She greeted him with a kiss.

'Hey, sweetheart, I hope Ganesha's not working you too hard.'

'Where are you off to?'

'I've got some work. Looks like some newspaper picked up a report on a vimana sighting over Nepal. So I need to draft a Press Release which Narada will get one of his contacts to issue.'

'They do work like the frigging CIA, don't they?'

She lovingly tousled Aaditya's hair.

'It is hard work. And they don't even pay a salary. And you thought studying in college was a tough gig. See you later.'

She kissed him and left. Not having anything better to do, Aaditya returned to the room he had been with Ganesha. There was nobody there, so he called up, or rather willed up, a monitor and asked for any news reports on unidentified flying objects. He got several

references to the story Tanya had mentioned. Then he asked for any references to unexplained aircraft losses. He saw one report, from an internal Pentagon memo.

How the hell did these guys hack into everything including the Pentagon?

One line in the memo caught his eye.

December 14, 2011. Predator drone lost over Northern Afghanistan. Cause unknown, though enemy action suspected. Fourth loss in three weeks.

Four Predators lost in three weeks? As someone with a lifelong interest in flying, he had followed how the US had used Predator drones with devastating effect, the one bright spot in an otherwise disastrous war in Afghanistan. So, how had the Taliban suddenly discovered how to knock out four in three weeks-more than they had managed in the last ten years put together?

He quickly called up any other reports of lost Predators, and sure enough, he saw that all four has been lost as a result of suspected enemy action. He also saw in some US Army memos the emerging panic that if the Taliban had indeed mastered how to down Predators, then the balance of the war in Afghanistan could shift decisively. He began cross-tabbing with any reports of unidentified flying objects. Then he saw it.

Four months ago, before the spate of Predator downings had begun, a Pentagon report had a small item tucked away among the minutiae of war. A US Air Force F-15 flying over Afghanistan had picked up an unidentified flying object on its radar for a split second near the area where the Predator had been reported lost. The unidentified contact then disappeared off radar, being tracked as moving at more than five thousand kilometres per hour. It had been dismissed as a glitch in the radar system and ignored.

Aaditya looked over at Ganesha, who had opened a box of sweets and was gulping them down, two at a time. He offered one to Aaditya, but then seeing his expression asked what was up. When Aaditya mentioned what he had discovered, Ganesha looked over the data, and then asked Aaditya to go take a break while he dug deeper. As Aaditya left the room, he heard Ganesha mutter to himself.

'What mischief are you up to, old friend Kalki?'

***

Aaditya was lost in thought. Tanya put her head on his chest.

'I do hope you're not thinking of another woman.'

'Of course not, but I was thinking of something.'

When Tanya probed, he said, 'Look, even if I assume that these

guys are actually aliens, and everything they say is true, one thing does not make sense. How could they not have aged in 15,000 years? You know, you've been around them for so long.'

Tanya looked irritated and turned her face away.

'Tanya, did I say something wrong?'

'No, they did tell me, but I'm sure they can explain it better. Why don't you just ask one of them? But for once, at least now, please stop thinking of them and pay me some attention.'

Aaditya pulled her close and did just that.

The next morning, he was called to the conference room for a meeting. When he walked in, he found the Devas more agitated than he had ever seen. All the Devas were there, and they seemed to be talking at the same time.

'Let me and my Ganas go over there. We will smash them,' thundered Shiva.

'Shiva, this requires a bit more thinking through. The last thing we want is for a nuclear bomb to be triggered in the battle,' counseled Vishnu.

Brahma's voice cut through the clutter. He did not raise his voice, but there was an unmistakable stamp of authority that silenced everyone.

'Everyone has had their say, but most of you are just reacting to bits and pieces of information we've heard this morning. Let Ganesha tell us what he found so we all know exactly what we're dealing with.'

Ganesha stood up, and then pointed to Aaditya.

'He's the one who found out about it first. Hear it from him.'

With that he sat back down, popping another sweet into his mouth, leaving Aaditya with every eye in the room trained on him. When he finished his account, Ganesha piped in, 'So, I got our satellites to intercept a few cellphone conversations and my father here helped break a few knees to get the information we wanted.'

Shiva nodded with a smile as Ganesha continued, 'So, here's the deal. It seems Kalki is helping Al Qaeda but in return has extracted a terrible favor. He is passing on a crude nuclear device which he wants them to use on a US target.'

Aaditya was stunned at the casual way in which Ganesha shared the information. Brahma brought up a map of Afghanistan on the holographic display.

'So like him. Wreak havoc so he can reign over the rubble that remains. Well, we know what to do. Indra, get a plan ready. We meet again in an hour.'

Everyone left the room, leaving Aaditya feeling pretty confused. He rushed after Indra, figuring that since he was the one making whatever plan needed to be made, he could help.

'Aadi, I have a lot to plan. Can we chat later?'

'Whatever you're doing, can I come along?'

Indra stopped in his tracks.

'No.'

'Come on, I'm the one who found out about all this. Please don't leave me here while you go after them.'

'Aadi, it was made very clear that you cannot fly or take part in battle.'

This time, Aaditya was not going to give up that easily.

'These guys killed my father. Fine, you won't let me fly your precious vimanas, but at least let me be there when you take them out. At least let me have that measure of revenge.'

Kartik was passing by and stopped when he heard the exchange.

'He could just sit in my vimana. I won't let him get into trouble.'

Indra glared at him.

'Why don't you go and convince Brahma?'

Kartik replied with a smile, 'I did. Aadi did uncover this operation in the first place.'

Indra looked in Brahma's direction, not believing what Kartik had said, but the older Deva smiled, nodding his head in affirmation.

'Let the boy tag along. Kartik, keep him out of trouble, and he stays in your vimana.'

An hour later, Aaditya was in the hangar, where all the Devas had assembled. He had been given a white, full body suit, with a hood to protect him from the cold in case he was exposed to the elements. As Aaditya saw the buzz of activity in the hangar, it was clear that now Indra was in charge.

'Kartik, you will be flying top cover with me. I don't expect the Asuras to mess with us in the air, but we can't leave Shiva exposed on the ground. Narada is already on the ground, and is ensuring the target information we have is accurate and will also jam all transmissions-human and Asura, while the operation lasts. Shiva, are your Ganas ready?'

Shiva grinned and whistled. Aaditya was taken aback by the arrival of a dozen men who looked more like a group of kids than soldiers. Each was no more than four feet tall with clean-shaven heads and large, bulging eyes in their strangely elongated heads. They were all dressed in what seemed to be little more than brown loincloths, showing off their enormous muscles. Each carried some sort of weapon strapped to his back. Despite their size, they moved with the precision of trained soldiers, marching as one and then standing near the large vimana that Shiva piloted.

'Ganas, get into the *Nandi*. We're ready for takeoff.'

A door swung open on the side of the vimana and the men walked in wordlessly.

'Who the hell are those creatures?' Aaditya whispered to Kartik. Shiva answered for him. 'Those are my Ganas. Kalki has his daityas, and these are my own clone army. The daityas are clumsy oafs, but sometimes numbers do matter. And don't be misled by their small size, the Ganas will cut your throat before you know it.'

As Kartik nudged Aaditya to follow him to his vimana, he heard Shiva bellow at the top of his voice, 'Come on, folks, it's time to smash in some heads!'

***

They had been flying in silence for ten minutes, the three vimanas abreast of each other, when Aaditya asked Kartik what was on his mind.

'I get the stealth part, and how nobody picks your vimanas up on radar, but won't people be able to see you, flying in broad daylight like this?'

Kartik just tapped his head in response.

'It's all in the mind. Just as we fly with our thoughts, we can wish our vimanas to be invisible. Hard to explain in terms of your technology, but think of it as a sort of cloaking device, a skin that absorbs all light and makes the vimana virtually invisible. The downside is, we are blind too-when we activate that, our sensors turn off and we rely only on visual flight rules.'

Their vimana started a gradual descent as it crossed the Pakistan-Afghan border. It was still at an altitude of more than 70,000 feet but the skies below looked crowded, with dozens of green dots. As Aaditya sought their identities, they appeared below each dot. They were all American aircraft and a handful of loitering Predator drones. Then he saw three red dots streak in from the north border.

'So, the intelligence was right. Our Asura friends are here right on cue.'

Aaditya felt a tightening in his stomach, and involuntarily took out his good luck charm. Wanting to avenge his father was one thing, but knowing he was going to be in the thick of battle against the monsters he had encountered on his roof was another thing altogether. Kartik, perhaps sensing his anxiety, reached over and handed him something. Aaditya looked in his palm to see a small, cylindrical object, like a pocket flashlight or perhaps a laser pointer. It was black and had a small switch at one end, and two buttons-one red, the other yellow.

'Aadi, we'll stay in the air, so you shouldn't need it, but just in

case. The switch turns it on. Yellow stuns and red, well, it makes them go…poof!'

Aaditya nodded as he remembered Shiva using a weapon like this one during the battle on his rooftop. The vimana was now less than 20,000 feet above the mountains and descending rapidly. As they came lower, Aaditya could see that the Asura craft had landed in a valley, and near them were two jeeps full of men. Indra's vimana was still nearby but Shiva's craft peeled off to the right.

'Now we go in blind.'

Kartik muttered something, and the display disappeared. Aaditya looked out the cockpit to find he could no longer see either accompanying vimana. As he looked carefully, he thought he saw some distortion in the air where they were, but to the casual observer who did not know what he was looking for, they had for all intents and purposes, disappeared. More than a dozen daityas were encircling the two jeeps and Maya stepped forward to address the occupants. The men got out and knelt before Maya, laying an assortment of AK-47s and RPG launchers by their side.

'Al Qaeda's finest. The scum of your world cavorting with the scum of ours. How appropriate.'

'Kartik, they're all packed together. Why don't we just take them out?'

'We could just blow these bastards to hell right now, but how would your governments like to deal with the radioactive fallout of that little toy there? There's a town of twenty thousand not too far away and Brahma would vaporize us if we went back with innocent blood on our hands.'

Aaditya looked to where Kartik was pointing, and saw a large metal box just behind Maya. He sucked in his breath, realizing just what he was going to be a part of. He was also now close enough to make out Maya's features. This was the creature who had been responsible for his father's death. He gripped the weapon Kartik had given him in his right hand, raising it to point at Maya.

Kartik gently lowered Aaditya's hand.

'I know how you feel, and we will get him. But don't spoil the plan. Besides, we're at the outer edges of the range of the handheld vajra, and at this range, I'm not sure even I could take him out.'

'What if they have reinforcements? Our radar is off.'

'Narada is on the ground somewhere nearby and he'll be monitoring just that.'

Indra's voice boomed over his earpiece.

'Shiva, it's time for you to dance.'

Aaditya watched in fascination as the Ganas emerged from behind

rocks on either side of the assembled group. Their weapons were out. These looked like double-sided weapons-a rifle-like barrel at one end, and a large curved blade on the other. Aaditya hadn't noticed when they had taken up their positions. Shiva was there, holding his trident in his right hand and a vajra in his left. Kartik was tut-tutting to himself.

'That's my father. I keep telling him to just use the vajra and be done with it. But he loves mixing it up.'

Maya must have sensed something. Just as the Ganas fired their first volley-streaks of light that shot out towards the daityas--he took a step back. Six or seven daityas were hit, each of them glowing a bright red for a second before they seemed to implode in on themselves, turning into mounds of dust that fell to the ground where they had stood.

The Ganas closed in, moving with amazing agility, rolling in under the blows of the larger daityas and cutting them off at the knees with their blades. Shiva kicked one daitya to the ground, when Narada's voice cut in, 'Kartik, three pick-up trucks approaching from the south-east, just behind that grey peak. I think our turbaned friends have reinforcements.'

Their vimana swung into a sharp turn and climbed. Aaditya peered out the cockpit and as they crossed the peak, spotted the approaching vehicles. One had a large caliber machinegun mounted on its back, and each one was bristling with men armed with rifles and RPGs.

'Aadi, this is no video game. When we fire, men will die. And since your world's chemical composition is, to put it mildly, a bit different, they won't disappear into dust. There will be blood and gore where men once stood.'

Aaditya could feel his throat dry up. Then Kartik stunned him with his next statement, 'When we fire, we will be seen. So the first shot is the only one which will surprise. Go on, make it count.'

'What do you mean?'

'You wanted to fly and fight. Go on, I won't tell anyone. Take the first shot, and then I'll take over.'

Aaditya was too stunned to respond. Kartik leaned over and put a plug in his right ear. As had happened earlier, Aaditya felt a sharp jolt of pain.

'Just think where exactly you want to aim, and then choose your weapon. The vajra will get these vehicles and also tear up any man. For armored vehicles or long-range shots, use an astra, which is like your missiles. Come on, take the shot.'

Aaditya looked at the lead vehicle, the one with the large machine gun. He imagined a shot taking out the vehicle precisely

where the gun was mounted.

'Good pick. That's the weapon that could have caused problems. Now, hurry up before they get too close.'

Aaditya was about to fire when he saw the men gathered on the truck. The one closest to the gun was little more than a boy, with a beard that had not yet fully grown and a rifle that hung awkwardly from one shoulder, as if it were still a bit heavy for him. Aaditya imagined killing him, then paused. He couldn't do it. Kartik took the plug out of Aaditya's ear and put it in his own.

The vehicle exploded into a giant fireball as a bolt of light slammed into it. The two trucks behind it careened to the side of the road, some of the men firing at the flying vehicle they now saw in the sky.

'Sorry but there was no more time. Let me do this.'

Another truck exploded before the men in the third truck realized that they were sitting ducks and began jumping out to take up positions behind rocks. One rocket snaked up towards the vimana. A bolt of light intercepted it, and the rocket exploded while it was still far away. Kartik was now hunting individual targets, streaks of light reaching out and hitting men hiding behind the rocks with the precision of a sniper rifle. The last man threw down his guns and raced away into the mountains, perhaps to tell his comrades of the incredible new weapon the Americans had unleashed on them.

Suddenly Indra's voice boomed into their ears.

'Come back, we're done here.'

Kartik took the vimana back to the scene of the main battle and set it down a few feet away from the nearest jeep. All three Asura vimanas were still there. Indra placed a glowing orb in each and stepped back. They imploded and disappeared into puffs of dust. There was no sign of the daityas, but the dust swirling in the wind told Aaditya what their fate must have been. It looked like the Asuras had not been the only ones to suffer losses, as three Ganas were also missing.

Kartik opened the cockpit, and the first thing that hit Aaditya was the stench. A smell like badly burnt meat. He controlled himself from gagging but when he disembarked and came closer, he doubled over and retched loudly. Spread out before him were the charred remains of the Al Qaeda men. He felt a hand touch his shoulder softly. It was Indra.

'That's why we try and avoid bloodshed, Aadi. War sounds glorious, but it is an ugly thing to behold.'

Aaditya retched again, and his eyes watering, walked weakly towards the Devas, who had gathered near Shiva. He could hear Shiva talking, anger and frustration evident in his voice.

'Maya and one daitya got away, and they have the nuclear weapon with them.'

'They couldn't have gotten far, Father. Should we hunt them from the sky?'

Indra shook his head.

'No Kartik, by now lots of people would be on their way. The Americans would have seen the smoke and Asura reinforcements are no doubt on the way to pick up Maya. Plus, we succeeded in preventing them from carrying out their plan. Let's go back.'

Aaditya's eyes were blurred with the smoke and his own tears. His throat was burning from the two times he had thrown up. He felt weak, like a coward. He had asked to fight, asked to be sent out to avenge his father, but then had behaved like a scared child. He turned to his right, away from the smoke, to clear his eyes, and also to not have to face the Devas. A movement behind some rocks in the distance caught his eye. A dark shape emerged from the shadows. It was a daitya with a long weapon at his shoulders. He was aiming at the Devas. Aaditya saw him shift his aim slightly. His eyes followed the daitya's aim, and realized he was aiming at Shiva.

Even before he could think, Aaditya was running towards Shiva. The Devas turned towards him, shouting, asking him what was wrong. He ran past Kartik and jumped at Shiva, using all his strength to push the Deva out of the way. A bolt of light streaked towards them, missing Shiva by inches. Aaditya fell to the ground, a terrible pain shooting through his left arm. It felt as if his entire arm was on fire and he screamed in agony. As he rolled on the ground and came up, the Devas had already exploded into action. Shiva and Kartik were sprinting towards the rocks where the shot had come from. Shiva leapt out of the way of another blast while Kartik, firing his vajra on the run, went forward. The daitya must have fled for they jumped over the rocks and disappeared from view in hot pursuit.

Aaditya felt a blast of hot air as Indra's vimana took off. His headset came alive.

'Aadi, stay here. I'll watch from the sky to ensure there are no more surprises.'

Aaditya crawled towards Kartik's vimana, and leaned against it. He took a look at his left arm. It seemed to have been burnt from the elbow down, and was a bleeding, black mess. Wincing at the pain, he lay back, his eyes closed, as he waited for the Devas to return. He heard some movement nearby and opened his eyes. He found himself staring into the terrifying snake eyes of Maya.

He reached out for the vajra lying near his right hand, but Maya stomped down on his hand with his foot, making Aaditya shout in pain. Maya reached closer, holding a curved blade next to Aaditya's

neck.

'I would love to cut your throat from ear to ear, but my master has a message for you. Take this plug and put it in your ear to hear what he has to say and you may learn what really happened to your father and not the lies the Devas have fed you.'

Then Maya straightened and hesitated for a second, perhaps tempted at the prospect of flying back in one of the Deva vimanas, but a shout from Shiva sent him scampering into the rocks.

Aaditya lay there wordlessly as Shiva lifted him up and carried him into his vimana. One of the Ganas began to tend to his wounds, and Aaditya felt his eyes closing from the pain and the fatigue and the morphine that had just been injected into him. His last thought before he slipped under was, *what the hell did Kalki want with him?*

EIGHT

When Aaditya opened his eyes, Tanya was standing over him. He wanted to ask what had happened, but before he could say anything, she smothered him in kisses.

'If I'm dead, this is a pretty good heaven to go to.'

Tanya smiled and hugged him. 'Why the hell did you have to go and be a hero?'

Aaditya didn't know what to say to that, so he just lay back on the pillows that were propping him up. His left arm was heavily bandaged, and he still felt a bit dizzy from all the medication that must have been pumped into him from the IV drip that was attached.

'Tanya, I'd like a word with this hero of yours.'

Shiva sat down next to Aaditya and Tanya excused herself, walking out of the room.

'Aadi, do you know why I asked to take you along on this mission?'

Aaditya just looked at Shiva's blue eyes that were looking straight at him.

'So I could rid you of what I thought were your foolish notions about going into battle. So you would see that battle and death are ugly things that you don't have the stomach for.'

Aaditya thought back to how he had reacted on seeing the dead bodies and wondered if Shiva was in fact right. Then Shiva surprised him. 'But you proved me wrong. It takes a far braver man to risk his own life to save someone than to just take someone's life. Thank you.'

Shiva left the room, just as Kartik walked in. The younger Deva looked happy, with a smile on his face, and was whistling a tune.

'Aadi, you are making a habit of rescuing Devas in trouble, aren't you?'

Aaditya motioned for him to sit down and asked if they had got Maya.

'No, he got away. But here's a secret, next time one of us looks like we're in danger, if there are other Devas around, don't worry too much.'

'Why's that?'

'We're a bit harder to kill than humans,' said Kartik with a grin.

'If you really have been around for 15,000 years, I'd say you live a fair bit longer than us.'

Kartik laughed and answered, 'The bodies you see are just shells. We created these shells to better fit into the environment we are in. Our true form is more energy than a physical body. So, even if our

physical body is destroyed, we can create a new one.'

'So I wasted a perfectly good chance to escape by coming back with you.'

Kartik's expression became more sombre.

'No, my friend, you did save my life. If our body is destroyed, we have but a couple of hours to transfer to a new shell. So I do owe you a debt, and I fully intend to repay it.'

'And how will you do that?'

Kartik leaned closer.

'By teaching you how to fly a vimana.'

Aaditya sat up, not believing what he had just heard.

'So you've decided I can fly after all?'

Kartik's grin was back.

'Who am I to decide? My father is raving about your courage and he appealed to Brahma, and there you have it. You will now be trained as a pilot.'

A hard glint came into Kartik's eyes as he continued, 'And, perhaps one day, you can get the opportunity to avenge your father.'

The next week passed in a blur of treatments and sedation and being nursed back to health by Tanya. On the latter count, if ever Aaditya had any doubts, they were firmly dispelled now. He was, as the old song went, truly, madly and deeply in love with her, and it seemed that she felt the same way. What more could a guy ask for?

If Aaditya thought his life was good, he had never bargained for what happened next. He was rudely awakened, bundled out of bed and a blindfold placed around his eyes. He struggled in vain against the strong arms that held his hands behind him and marched him out of his room.

'What the hell is going on?'

There was no answer as he was pushed out. Then his blindfold was opened and he gaped in shock at what he saw before him. It was a gleaming silver vimana, looking much like what Kartik's did-a sleek, triangular craft with a tapered nose and a raised cockpit. Except this one was not covered in any animal livery. On its side was painted the crest that Aaditya always carried as a good luck charm, the squadron badge that had once belonged to his father. He didn't know what to say and turned to find Kartik, Shiva, Indra and Narada standing next to him.

Shiva thumped him on the shoulder.

'I thought it fitting that you ride with the insignia that once belonged to your father. As for this morning's theatrics, they were entirely my son's idea.'

Kartik grinned.

'At least you can't accuse us Devas of not having a sense of

humour. Now come on and follow me in your vimana.'

Aaditya ran into his craft and into the cockpit. It seemed identical to the one he had been in with Kartik. There were two earplugs and he inserted them. Kartik's voice came in over his headset.

'You know the basics by now. Gently raise the vimana and follow me out. Then, the fun begins.'

Kartik's vimana gracefully slid out of the open hangar door, while Aaditya's exit was much more wobbly and clumsy. Conscious of the narrow space he was maneuvering in, his vimana wobbled its way out till he was in the valley, hovering a few feet above the ground. Kartik's vimana was just a few feet away and slightly above him. Then, Kartik's vimana seemingly disappeared in a blur of speed, as his laughing voice echoed into Aaditya's ears, 'Catch me if you can!'

Where the hell have you gone, Kartik?

No sooner had Aaditya thought that, the holographic display appeared, showing the blue dot representing Kartik's vimana speeding away, in an almost vertical climb. Aaditya ordered his vimana to accelerate to a matching speed-a thousand kilometres per hour and follow Kartik's trajectory. The vimana responded immediately, and Aaditya was pushed back into his seat as it entered a vertical climb. Aaditya increased his speed and soon was rapidly closing the distance to Kartik's vimana. He was now passing 50,000 feet altitude and suddenly it struck him just what he was doing.

Here he was, doing what he had always dreamed of, indeed doing more than he had ever imagined-piloting a craft with capabilities beyond what any fighter aircraft was capable of. That feeling of exhilaration stripped away any remaining nervousness he had, and he joined the chase in earnest. Within a minute, he was within visual range of Kartik's vimana.

'Got you!' Aaditya exulted over the intercom.

'Not bad, now just try and get me off your tail!'

Kartik's vimana swerved to the right in a tight turn, and before Aaditya knew it, Kartik was on his tail. Aaditya took his vimana through a series of evasive maneuvers, turning right and left, doing a loop to try and turn the tables, but whatever he did, Kartik remained rooted behind him. Finally out of sheer exasperation, Aaditya spoke up, 'Gimme a break! What the hell do I do?'

'Aaditya, this is tougher than flying a normal plane since you telegraph your moves before you even realize it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Our vimanas are thought controlled, what we called mantric vimanas. So, your craft will start reacting the moment you think of a maneuver, which may be even before you are consciously aware of it. Since your mind is the key, flying our vimanas is as much about

learning to control your mind as it is about flying skills.'

The lessons continued, and Aaditya's days fell into a predictable but delightful routine. Evenings spent with Tanya, days spent in the sky with Kartik, and any spare time in the camaraderie of the Devas. In his second week of flying lessons, he got his first exposure to Asuras in the sky. He and Kartik had been flying over Southern China, when his display picked up two red dots about five hundred kilometres away.

'Asuras, my friend. Care to pay them a visit?'

Even before Aaditya could think of what to say, Kartik had turned towards the red dots. Not knowing what else to do, Aaditya followed. He noticed that Kartik had slowed down to less than two hundred kilometres per hour, and he followed suit, pulling alongside Kartik.

'Aadi, this is a live lesson in what our enemies are made of. We have two key advantages that they would kill for. First, their vimanas are mechanically controlled, much like human fighter planes, what we call kritika vimanas. That means that we have an advantage in reaction time and maneuverability with our thought controls. Second, their sensors are nowhere as good as ours. We can see them from more than five hundred kilometres out, but they won't know we are there till we're within a hundred kilometres of them.'

Aaditya soaked in the information as he kept looking at the red dots on his display, now closing in towards him and Kartik.

'Unfortunately, Brahma has forbidden combat this close to our base, since we don't want to attract attention in case any humans spot explosions. So today, we fly away.'

Kartik's vimana dove away, and Aaditya followed suit. By now, while not nearly as fast or as quick as Kartik, Aaditya had reached a point where he could fly without requiring too much instruction. As he flew back to the base, he thought that, for the first time outside of his dreams or video games, he could truthfully say that he was a pilot.

He found Tanya waiting in his room. A quick kiss, and then she was about to leave.

'Brahma wants me to work on a special project. I'm going crazy with work.'

'What project?'

'He's asked me to think through what people's reactions could be from a religious standpoint if the Devas make their presence public.'

Aaditya had heard mention before about the Devas thinking of how they would handle their first official contact with humans. He asked what Brahma had in mind.

'He doesn't tell me, but I think he's worried that with the way Kalki's going, it may become inevitable if the war comes into the open.'

As Aaditya started to change, Tanya stopped at the door. 'Hey Aadi, I found a weird looking plug in one of your pockets. I was about to throw it away but thought I'd ask if you needed it. Be back soon, sweetheart.'

Aaditya looked at the small plug lying on the table, and his heart stopped for a second. In all the excitement of the last few days, he had forgotten all about it. He reached out with shaking fingers to pick up the plug that Maya had given him in Afghanistan.

What did Kalki have to say to him about his father?

***

'I am honoured to be speaking to Ghosh's son.'

The deep, measured voice sounded like it belonged to a sports commentator rather than a renegade god out to destroy the world.

'What a twist of fate! The son of the man who served me so well now serves my enemies. I hear you are quite a favourite of the Devas, and if you are half the man your father was, I don't blame them. Words are cheap, and you may not believe me, but I am not who Brahma and the Devas make me out to be. If ever you really want to learn what happened to your father, come to me. The Devas know where I am, and I know exactly where they are. Since we cannot break each other's defences, we play our game of cat and mouse all over your planet. But I do hope to get a chance to see you.'

Aaditya took the plug out and sat back, thinking about what he had just heard. What had happened to his father? What was the truth about Kalki? If his father had indeed lived after the accident and worked for Kalki, why had he not come back?

That night, as he and Tanya lay on the couch, watching TV, Aaditya asked her, 'Hey, I was wondering what the deal with Kalki is. I mean, he's Brahma's son, isn't he? So, why's he such an enemy of the Devas?'

Tanya propped her chin up on her palms and looked at Aaditya. 'They say he was Brahma's favourite son. The strongest, the smartest. That's perhaps why the Devas took his betrayal so hard. But what's with the interest in Kalki? How's your flying going?'

The next day, Aaditya went to meet Ganesha, who was still lost in his monitors and data.

'Hey Ganesha, was thinking of doing some research on the Asuras. Any idea where I could start?'

'You've come to the right place. Sit down on the red chair there. That's where we bring up our archives. I'm afraid you may not be able to access everything, but whatever's cleared for you to see is there. All

you need to do is ask.'

Aaditya got all he wanted to know about the Asuras and their vimanas, and then some. There were detailed manuals on the daityas and how best to defeat them. For some reason, a strike to the back of the neck seemed to work. He learnt about battles from Earth's ancient past. Under other circumstances he would have loved to sit and learn about how the Devas defeated an army of daityas in battle on the banks of the Euphrates River using tactical nuclear weapons more than 12,000 years ago. But, try as he may, he got no hits on Kalki. All he got were references of him leading the Asuras, or to plots he had hatched. But there was nothing about who he really was and why the Devas hated and feared him so much.

His curiosity aroused, he remembered what Brahma had told him-that Kalki was also the same evil creature that lived in human memory as the Devil or Satan. If the Devas were not going to help him, he could always turn to Google. Back in his room, he brought up a web browser on the holographic display and searched for 'devil and the gods'. The world's religions essentially mirrored the story that Brahma had told him, that Satan, or Lucifer as he was known in the Bible, had been one of the angels, and was cast away by God. But why? What had caused this war that was still raging? He came across a passage from the Koran, whose translation read: 'It is We Who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels prostrate to Adam, and they prostrate; not so Iblis (Lucifer); He refused to be of those who prostrate.'

(Allah) said: 'What prevented thee from prostrating when I commanded thee?' He said: 'I am better than he: Thou didst create me from fire, and him from clay.'

That evening, Aaditya sought out Narada in the Devas' club. Narada was sitting in a corner, sipping on some Soma. Aaditya picked up a Coke and sat down next to him.

'You missed your flying today. All well?'

Aaditya certainly didn't want to reveal anything about Kalki's message, but he did tell what his searches had revealed.

'I've just been trying to find out what exactly happened to cause this war with Kalki. But I keep drawing a blank. If he was one of the Devas, is this all just about his greed for territory or something more?'

Narada took a long sip and then replied, 'Aadi, there is one thing Brahma may not have told you.'

Aaditya stopped, waiting to hear what Narada had to say.

'Back home, Kalki was the prodigal son-smart, strong, ambitious, the natural heir to Brahma. But when we came here, we all saw that his ambition had a dark tinge. He was not content to wait for his turn to ascend to the top. As your holy books say, he figured it was better

to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. But then he did something that we should have put an end to.'

'What was that?'

'He interfered in your evolution.'

Aaditya waited for him to explain as Narada drained his glass and filled another.

'When your books say that God made man in his own image, they are not exaggerating. Kalki used genetic engineering to make slightly smarter versions of your Neanderthal ancestors so that he could have an army of his own. Many of his experiments resulted in freaks that did not survive. But two did. The Daityas, whom he used as his muscle.'

'What was the second?' Aaditya asked.

'Homo Sapiens. Your species.'

Aaditya stopped, stunned by what he had heard, as Narada continued,

'Aaditya, he just provided the initial spark all those thousands of years ago. How humans have evolved since then has been the result of your own choices and experiences, and our assessment was that the development of intelligent beings like humans was certain. Kalki just seemed to have accelerated that a bit, but that interference itself was against our rules.'

Aaditya digested everything he had heard, realizing just how complex and layered the connections between the Devas and humans was. Narada spoke again,

'He was Brahma's favoured son, and many of us kept warning Brahma that Kalki was fast getting out of control, but perhaps even he is a father first. So when he did finally order Kalki to cease his activities, Kalki claimed that he was being betrayed, that the other Devas were just jealous. Since then, he has fought two battles-one for survival with us, and the second, for control of those he created and claims as his own-your people.'

Aaditya walked back to his room, feeling confused. Whom should he believe? He was about to turn into the corridor that led to his room when Kartik came running.

'Aadi, where have you been? Come on!'

Aaditya hurriedly followed Kartik towards the hangar.

'Two Asura vimanas just attacked targets in Iran. Looks like they're trying to spark a war in the Middle East, and we tracked two more flying towards Israel.'

'So what do we do?'

'Blow them out of the sky!' replied Kartik with a grin.

Aaditya got into his vimana, still a bit confused by the rapid turn of events. He followed Kartik out of the hangar on the way to his first

real-life dogfight.

***

They were five hundred kilometres away when the Asuras showed up on Aaditya's display.

'Hey Kartik, should we fire?'

'No, at this range they'll detect our astras coming and have a pretty good chance of evading them. Plus I like to get up close.'

With that Kartik took his vimana in a steep climb, accelerating to more than Mach 6 and Aaditya followed, knowing what was on the Deva's mind. They would swoop down from above at the Asuras. Given how superior their vimanas were, it struck Aaditya as a bit of overkill that the Devas had sent two of them against two Asuras. He saw the clouds zip by him as he climbed to over 75,000 feet, and then leveled off.

The Asuras were now within Israeli airspace. On the way, he had learnt that an Asura strike had destroyed an Iranian air defence site and this attack was headed straight for the Israeli nuclear facilities near Dimona. Both Israel and Iran would deny the attacks, but the chances of the attacks triggering an all-out war were only too real. As Brahma had told him, part of Kalki's game plan was to bleed and weaken the major human powers, and a conflict like this would no doubt drag the US in.

'Aadi, now's your chance to put all that practice to work. Good hunting.'

Aaditya realized he was being given the first shot, and he closed his eyes for a moment. Could he take another life? Literally, with a thought of his, another being would cease to exist. Could he live with that?

Kartik must have sensed his dilemma.

'Aadi, they're no more than a couple of hundred kilometres from their target. The radioactive fallout of this attack alone may kill thousands, not to mention what may happen if Israel retaliates in kind against Iran. Let me go in if you want.'

Aaditya didn't respond but guided his vimana into a dive aimed at intercepting the Asuras. He was still a hundred kilometres away when a red circle appeared around the dot representing his vimana on his display. The Asuras were tracking him. There was now no backing down.

He picked the lead Asura vimana on his display, and focused his mind on sending two astras to destroy it. No sooner had he thought it, than two balls of blue light emerged from under his vimana and streaked away towards the Asuras. The second Asura pilot, now seeing

that they had been ambushed, aborted his attack run and turned towards Aaditya.

The astras, represented by glowing blue dots on his display homed in on their target. The Asura pilot seemed to be maneuvering desperately, but in vain. The blue dots kept closing in towards the red dot on Aaditya's display till they merged, and all three disappeared from the display.

'That's a kill.'

Kartik's voice was exultant. The second Asura was now less than thirty kilometres away and had fired two of his own missiles at Aaditya. He responded without conscious thought, his instincts honed by the hours of flying with Kartik. No sooner had he seen the missiles on his display, than two astras of his own streaked out to intercept them, vaporizing them before they even got close to his vimana. Still clutching on to his lucky charm like an imaginary joystick, Aaditya took his vimana through a tight turn to the left. Now he was heading straight at the Asura, the two vimanas closing in at each other rapidly. The Asura pilot fired one more missile, and Aaditya immediately fired two astras to intercept the missile and also two more at the Asura craft. He watched the four blue bolts streak out into the sky ahead of him, and a fireball glowed briefly before disappearing, signaling the successful interception of the Asura missile. Both remaining astras tracked into the Asura craft. He was so lost in watching the display that Kartik's frantic call jolted him.

'Watch out!! Straight ahead!'

Aaditya looked up to see the Asura vimana was now just a couple of kilometres away, its dark saucer shape plainly visible to the naked eye, and as Aaditya watched, both astras slammed into it. The Asura vimana exploded into countless fragments in a flash of red, and began collapsing upon itself. Aaditya swerved his vimana hard to right, missing the collapsing fragments of the Asura craft by a whisker. When he looked back, there was no trace of the Asura vimana left.

Suddenly, explosions buffeted his vimana on both his left and right.

'What's that?'

'Situational awareness, my friend.'

Kartik had said nothing to the effect, but Aaditya knew how badly he had screwed up. He had been so engrossed in the air battle with the vimanas that he had forgotten all about who else might be watching. His display told him that he was now barely five thousand feet above the ground, and must have been visible to Israeli ground forces, who were peppering him with anti-aircraft fire. His display also showed two green dots closing in on him-Israeli F-15 fighters who, were no doubt being guided by ground forces to intercept a

strange aircraft flying overhead.

He looked around and did not see Kartik's vimana, though his display showed that Kartik was just to his right. Lesson learnt, Aaditya willed himself to be invisible. Immediately his display went blank. He watched in fascination as the Israeli fighters passed within a few hundred feet of him, puzzled at the sudden disappearance of the intruding craft. When the fighters had left the area, Aaditya and Kartik charted a course back to base.

When Aaditya got out of his cockpit, he saw a veritable reception committee waiting for him. Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Indra were all there, as was Tanya, who ran up to him and hugged him as soon as his feet hit the ground.

The next few minutes passed in a blur of congratulations and smiles, but when Aaditya was back in his room, he finally got time to reflect on what he had done. He had killed two beings-Asuras or not, they were living things whose lives he had snuffed out in an instant. Tanya must have sensed what was on his mind, and she came into the room, sitting down behind Aaditya.

'You know what they say about being careful what you wish for.'

Aaditya turned towards her and held her hands. 'As a kid, I had once asked my dad how he dealt with it, especially after the bombing runs he had done over Kargil during the '99 war with Pakistan. He told me what drove him was not just protecting his country but the men who flew with him and counted on him. He said that he wished nobody ever fought wars, but since men do wage war, he wanted to ensure all his boys made it back home.'

'I thought you wanted to fight to avenge your father.'

Aaditya had told her nothing about Kalki's message, so he just nodded.

That evening a small celebration had been held in Aaditya's honour in the club, and he found himself bombarded with congratulations. He met Durga after some time, and she explained that she had been away on a mission in Africa. Narada slapped him on the back, while a visibly drunk Shiva kept referring to Aaditya as 'my new brave warrior'. Of all the Devas, only Brahma seemed to sense that there was something else on Aaditya's mind. The elder Deva sat down next to him, a glass of Soma in his hand, as Aaditya watched Shiva and Kartik on the dance floor.

'Aadi, this is what you wanted, isn't it?'

Looking into the Deva's eyes, Aaditya realized it would be better to stick as close to the truth as possible.

'Brahma, killing others does bother me, but I've also been reading up on Kalki. Is he really the villain I was told he is?'

Brahma averted his eyes, as if not wanting Aaditya to see his

reaction.

'Aadi, to a father a son can never be a villain, but sometimes even the most loving father must realize that his son has gone too far down the path of evil to be redeemed. In a perverse way, he is man's creator, not the benevolent god of your religions, but given human predilection for violence, perhaps that is not entirely surprising, is it?'

Brahma left Aaditya alone. After some time Indra came up and sat wordlessly next to Aaditya. He said to nobody in particular, 'The first one you kill is the toughest. After that, it's much easier.'

Aaditya asked the Deva general the other question that was on his mind.

'Indra, if we know that Kalki keeps creating mischief like this, why don't you just warn human governments and make contact with them? Sure, your technology is far ahead of ours, but if the major powers knew what was going on, and sided with you, Kalki would really have no plan.'

Shiva had come down to join them, and he passed a shot glass to Aaditya.

'Now drink a man's drink before I answer. Here's some Tequila.'

Aaditya usually never had anything stronger than beer, other than the night when he had gone and plastered his bike on the fender of a bus, but he did not want Shiva to stop talking. He felt the tequila burn its way down his throat as Shiva downed a shot himself.

'Aadi, do you think we haven't tried? Your bloody governments are just so greedy and power-hungry, sometimes I wonder if we should just leave them to Kalki's tender mercies.'

Indra raised a restraining hand, but Shiva was either too agitated, or too drunk to notice. 'In 1947, we established contact with the US government and set up a meeting.'

Despite feeling a bit tipsy, Aaditya sat up straight at the startling revelation. 'What happened?'

'The bastards ambushed us, hungry for our technology and weapons. Brahma had wanted for us to go in person. I was more cautious, having seen how humans have been over the ages, and sent a stripped down, captured Asura vimana with a Gana at the controls. The Americans shot it down, and what they got spurred on a lot of their advances since then in the areas of stealth and electronics. That was at a place called Roswell. Since then, we have decided to be more cautious.'

Aaditya digested what he had heard. He had heard and read about the infamous Roswell incident, where an UFO had supposedly crashed in the US, and since then, had been the subject of much conspiracy theories and countless books and TV programmes.

Just then, Ganesha burst into the room.

'Big problem, folks.'

As he motioned with his right hand, a giant holographic display appeared in the middle of the room. Aaditya saw that it was a breaking news telecast on CNN.

'As we have been reporting over the last few minutes, a major earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale has occurred in the oceans off Japan's east coast. A tsunami warning has been issued throughout the coastal area, and we are awaiting more details.'

An earthquake and tsunami had battered Japan just a year ago, and Aaditya wondered what new horrors this one would bring to that nation. He heard Indra mutter to himself, 'Kalki, what the hell are you doing?'

Aaditya asked Indra what a natural disaster had to do with Kalki.

'Perhaps everything,' came the Deva's enigmatic reply.

NINE

The next morning, Aaditya was awakened by a knock on the door. He saw that it was still only five in the morning. When he opened the door, Kartik ran more than walked in.

'Sorry to barge in like this, but come with me.'

Seeing Kartik's expression, Aaditya didn't argue much and followed him to the hangar. When he saw that Kartik was walking towards his vimana, he finally asked him what he was doing.

'I'm flying to Japan, and I thought you'd like to come along. I may need someone to watch my back.'

'Japan?'

'Yup.'

With little more by way of explanation, Kartik climbed into his cockpit.

'Come on, I'll explain on the way there.'

Aaditya got into his vimana and followed Kartik out, both of them climbing to high altitude and then setting a course for Japan.

'Hey Kartik, what are we supposed to be doing there? The tsunamis are still continuing from the last news reports I saw.'

'That's exactly why we are going there. We picked up some Asura vimanas flying near Japan just after the first quake struck, and Brahma wants us to take a closer look.'

Aaditya remembered Indra's words and asked Kartik how exactly the Asuras were involved.

'We are not really sure, but as your people say, once is an accident, twice may be a coincidence, but three times in a row is a premeditated plan.'

Aaditya was not able to ask much more as they soon found themselves over Japanese airspace. Their displays were cluttered with green dots representing relief helicopters and aircraft that were streaming towards the disaster zones. But there were no signs of any Asuras.

'Kartik, should we go lower?'

'There will be dozens of relief choppers around, and I don't want to be seen. Besides, if there are Asuras around, we'll pick them up.'

'Holy shit! Did you see that?'

Kartik had obviously been seeing exactly what had caught Aaditya's attention and the young Deva whistled.

'So our old friends are capable of learning new tricks.'

Aaditya looked again to make sure that he had not imagined it. Two red dots had appeared on his display for a few seconds and then

disappeared. Then they did it again. The mystifying bit was that the Asura craft had seemingly come out of the ocean and then again disappeared into it.

'Kartik, can our vimanas go underwater?'

'Not these ones. We do have craft that can operate under the oceans, and so do the Asuras, but it looks like they're launching and recovering their aerial vimanas from an underwater craft.'

'Can we track their submarine or whatever it is on our display?'

'No. I've already asked Ganesha to have one of our satellites take a look, and Vishnu is on the way in one of our own underwater craft, but I imagine by the time he gets here, the Asuras will be long gone.'

'What are they doing here?'

They waited for a few more minutes, circling the area, but got no further sign of the Asuras. Kartik asked Aaditya to follow him and turned west. Aaditya's display indicated that they were headed towards Thailand.

'Aadi, here's a geography quiz. Name a few famous Thai islands.'

Aaditya was puzzled at the question but decided to play along. 'Phuket, Krabi. Let me think, Koh Samui maybe. Can't think of any more. What does that have to do with anything?'

By way of reply, Kartik took his vimana into a dive, and Aaditya followed, breaking through the thick cloud cover. He was soon flying at no more than 10,000 feet altitude and could see the green-blue waters of the ocean below them, along with scattered islands.

'Aadi, ever heard of a place called Hong Island?'

'No, should I have?'

He could hear Kartik chuckle, clearly enjoying the suspense he was building up.

'Slow down next to me, and look down.'

Aaditya did as he was told, and looked down to see a small brownish-green island, virtually indistinguishable from the dozens of similar islands scattered around it.

'Kartik, what am I supposed to be looking at?'

'That, my friend, is the island of Hong off the Thai coast. If you want to know more, catch me if you can!'

With that, Kartik suddenly accelerated his vimana and streaked away towards their base. Aaditya had initially thought that these flying antics and games were a ruse to train him. Over the months, he had come to realize that of all the Devas, Kartik was a bit of a prankster and loved to fool around. That suited him just fine. He accelerated and was soon just behind Kartik.

As Kartik's vimana turned sharply to the right and then to the left, Aaditya matched him move for move. Kartik took his vimana into a roll, to try and turn the tables on Aaditya, but he was ready. As soon

as Kartik's vimana pitched up, Aaditya slowed down to a near hover and rotated his vimana, and when Kartik had completed his roll, Aaditya was right where he had been-on his tail.

Aaditya could hear Kartik grunt in frustration and the Deva took his vimana into a steep dive. Not willing to give up now, Aaditya followed.

What are you thinking, Kartik?

With Kartik continuing in a straight line, it suddenly came to Aaditya what Kartik's plan may be. Kartik brought his vimana to a sudden halt, the craft pitching up violently as it lost speed. He had hoped that Aaditya would overshoot him. Instead, Aaditya's voice came over his headset, 'Bang, you're dead!'

Guessing what Kartik was planning, Aaditya had slowed his own craft down drastically, so that when Kartik stopped, he easily stayed behind him.

Before they could continue their games, Indra spoke through their headsets. 'I know you must be enjoying yourselves, but I had sent you to do some work. Now please get back if you're done.'

Suitably chastened, Aaditya and Kartik flew straight back to Kongka La.

When they got out of their cockpits, Aaditya saw a new expression on Kartik's face, one he had not seen before. When Kartik asked him a bit stiffly to go and check what Ganesha was up to, he wondered if he had done something wrong. He was on the way when Narada caught up with him.

'Terrible business this. First the quake and then I heard about the Asuras you tracked. By the way, don't worry about Kartik, he'll be fine.'

'What's with him?'

Narada smiled.

'He's a fine pilot but a poor loser. We all were watching on our displays how you flew circles around him today. I guess this is what happens when the teacher realizes for the first time that the student has caught up.'

Aaditya found Ganesha as usual propped up in front of his screens, eating something. Lakshmi was sitting next to him, staring at some data. She nudged Ganesha and spoke in hushed tones, 'He never loses a chance to make a buck, does he?'

When they saw Aaditya enter, she explained, 'I keep tracking which shell companies Kalki may be using to fund his activities and also pay his human cronies. Guess what? Just before this quake, one of his firms had invested heavily in shares of firms that supply water purifiers, emergency rescue equipment and also some housing firms in Japan that have traditionally got reconstruction contracts. As you can

imagine, their stocks will climb sky high now, and he'll make a killing.'

Aaditya sat down, fascinated at the various levels at which this battle was waged, but he had other, more immediate concerns on his mind.

'Ganesha, everyone here seems to think Kalki has something to do with this quake, and Kartik said that some godforsaken place called Hong Island would give me clues. What's that about?'

Ganesha laughed, struggling to keep himself from spitting out the food that was in his mouth.

'Kartik will always be up to his tricks. I tell you, that brother of mine can never give a straight answer when he can have some fun making you work to get it. I need you to Google something.'

Aaditya inserted one of the control plugs in his ear and brought up a holographic display in front of him with a web browser open.

'Now Google "Hong Island UFO" and tell me what you see.'

Aaditya did as he was told and read through the first couple of search results. Then he turned to Ganesha, half smiling. 'Is this a joke? I got some trashy tabloid articles about how a UFO washed up on Hong Island after the 2004 Tsunami. But it's garbage. The articles claim there were two dead aliens inside.'

Ganesha raised an eyebrow in mock anger. 'And what's garbage about so-called aliens? After all, your alien could be my cousin.'

'Ganesha, come on, you must have seen this crap. Along with those alien bodies, they supposedly found a naked American woman whom they had been performing sexual experiments on, a McDonald's Happy Meal and some porn. Who would believe this stuff?'

'Nobody would. That was the whole idea, and these tabloids printed exactly what we fed them.'

'What?'

Ganesha turned towards Aaditya, offering him a sweet.

'You see, that evening, a craft did wash up on the beach at Hong Island. A few local fishermen saw it, and called some clueless local cops. But before any other authorities could get there, we had taken a look at it and destroyed it. But since word had gotten out, Narada and Tanya did their usual masterly PR and fed the tabloids such junk that nobody would believe it.'

'What craft was it?'

'The usual Asura vimana, with a dead Asura inside. It must have been caught up in the tsunami somehow. But the point is what the hell was it doing so close to the water in the first place?'

Aaditya thought back to the Asura vimanas he had encountered earlier in the day and wondered the same thing as Ganesha continued, 'The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake measured 9.3 on the Richter scale,

and you well know the catastrophic damage the resulting tsunami caused. In early 2010, there were two more major quakes-near Chile and Haiti, the latter resulting in almost as many deaths as in 2004. In 2011, we had the 8.9 quake off Japan, and now you have yesterday's Japan tsunami. The Japanese are well prepared and have much better infrastructure, but still several thousand souls have perished. What's common to all these events?'

Aaditya thought about it and answered that the obvious linkage was that they were all underwater quakes resulting in tsunamis. Ganesha nodded. 'That's not all. Every one of these events was accompanied by a huge spike in UFO sightings, and as we know from Hong Island and your mission today, the Asuras were indeed up and about in the same place and same time as these events.'

It suddenly struck Aaditya.

'Do you think Kalki is behind these quakes?'

'Of that we have no doubt now. The big question is what the hell his plan is.'

***

Aaditya was soon to realize what many men before him have-that hell indeed has no fury like a woman scorned. He had left in the morning when Tanya had been asleep and by the time he got back, it was already close to midnight and she was again asleep in her room. Normally, they went in and out of each other's rooms freely, but when he knocked there was no answer, and when he commanded the door to open, it stayed shut. When he woke up in the morning and sought Tanya out, he found her in a sullen mood. She would answer him with no more than monosyllabic responses and would not even look at him.

'Tanya, what's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

Aaditya sat down next to her on her bed and reached out to touch her arm, but she pulled it away.

'Sweetheart, are you mad about something?'

She turned briefly to look at him, and though she didn't say anything, her eyes told him just how angry she was.

'Hey, if I've done or said something, I really am sorry. Look, I screw up all the time, but the last thing I'd do is to hurt you on purpose. At least tell me what's wrong.'

'I have work to do as well. See you later.'

With those words, she disappeared, leaving Aaditya feeling really puzzled. He never got much of a chance to think about it during the day. All morning was spent sitting with the senior Devas who were poring over both the aftermath of the quakes and also the action in

the Middle East. Thanks to Aaditya and Kartik, a major war in the Middle East had been averted, but what was bothering most of the Devas was why Kalki had suddenly stepped up his operations to such an extent.

Seeing Kartik nowhere around, Aaditya asked Indra who was sitting next to him where he was.

'He's flying over Japan again, trying to see if he can get a glimpse of the Asuras.'

Aaditya wondered why he had not taken him along.

'Why don't we just attack Kalki's home base, or don't we know where that is?'

Vishnu brought up a holographic map, and highlighted an area in the North Atlantic Ocean.

'Aadi, it's time for a history refresher. In March 1918, the US Navy suffered its worst peacetime loss ever when the submarine USS Cyclops sank under unknown circumstances with 302 sailors on board. There were no survivors, and to this date, nobody knows what happened.'

A red dot appeared in the highlighted area.

'December 1945, Flight 19, a group of five US bombers disappeared in the same area. Again, no wreckage found, no survivors and no explanation for what happened. Over the years, dozens of ships and planes have gone missing in this area.'

As Vishnu spoke, more and more red dots appeared. Vishnu motioned with his hand and a rough triangle was drawn on the map, enclosing all the red dots.

'This is where Kalki lives. Under the water, in his base.'

'Why don't you go get him?'

'We tried once. We lost fifty Ganas and twenty of our remotely controlled vimanas. He's got some force field up that we just cannot penetrate. And as you've seen, he protects his turf quite aggressively. Any ship or plane approaching it goes missing.'

'If all those planes and ships have disappeared, surely someone's noticed by now.'

Shiva spoke up. 'Of course they've noticed. Everyone knows about it.'

When Aaditya asked him what he meant, Shiva smiled. 'I'm sure you have heard of this area. This is what people call the Bermuda Triangle.'

That evening Aaditya was in the club, feeling a bit low. First, Kartik seemed to be making a conscious effort to ignore him, and then Tanya had not even met him once since she had left in the morning. He had tried calling her a dozen times on her headset, but she never responded. With nobody else there, he walked over to the bar. He had

been here a dozen times, but never paid any attention to the bartender. He had learnt that the bartender was a Gana, one of Shiva's trusted warriors, and this one Shiva had personally trained in the art of mixing drinks. He never seemed to talk much, but grunted sympathetically when Aaditya sat down with a downcast expression. To the Gana's surprise, Aaditya asked for a glass for Soma. He had come to learn that Soma, while not alcoholic, was quite potent.

One evening Shiva had leant conspiratorially towards him and whispered into his ears, 'Our vimanas and technology are nothing. Our most prized secret is the recipe for Soma.'

Later, Narada had told him the more prosaic truth. Soma was indeed a drink with a kick to be reckoned with-a mixture of the Ephedra plant, which was now extinct but had been cloned by the Devas, milk and generous quantity of poppy seeds. The last ingredient made it a drink that could impart a very serious high.

That was when he saw Kartik walk in. Kartik just nodded to him and sat down some distance away, ordering a drink for himself. Perhaps because he was already a bit buzzed from the Soma, and perhaps because his mood was already pretty rotten, Aaditya walked over to Kartik.

'You having a bad day?'

Kartik just looked up and smiled.

'You seem to be avoiding me like the plague. What's up?'

Kartik seemed about to retort angrily, but then his features softened. 'Aadi, sit down and have a drink with me.'

He offered Aaditya another glass and poured himself one.

'I'm not avoiding you. Things have just been so crazy over the last few days that I haven't had time for anything. By the way, I gather Tanya's pissed with you because you forgot her birthday.'

Aaditya sat down next to Kartik, now realizing just why Tanya had been so angry with him. With all the action of the last few days, he had totally forgotten about her birthday.

'What the hell can I do to make it up to her?'

'You'll need to do something truly spectacular to recover from the hole you've dug for yourself, my friend.'

'Any bright ideas?'

Kartik beamed as he answered. 'I do actually. Take her for a spin.'

At first, Aaditya wasn't sure what Kartik had in mind, so he spelt it out. 'Take her for a flight on your vimana. She's never been in one.'

'Can I do that?'

Kartik slapped him playfully on the shoulder. 'You're a full-fledged pilot here now. You have two Asura kills to show for it. Of course you can.'

It was as if a light bulb had just gone on in Aaditya's head. Why

had he not thought of it before? 'Thank you, my friend. You're a lifesaver.' Then he ran to get Tanya.

***

'What the hell are you doing?'

Tanya almost screamed in surprise as Aaditya woke her up and bundled her out of bed.

'Trust me for a minute and just play along.' He put a blindfold around her eyes.

'Aadi, what are you doing? Come on, tell me!'

Aaditya laughed as he walked her out the room and towards the hangar. Finally, with a dramatic drum-roll he took off the blindfold, and Tanya gasped as she realized what Aaditya had in mind.

'Happy birthday, sweetheart.'

He kissed her and then helped her into the cockpit.

'Should we really be doing this?'

'Aadi Air Flight 1 is ready for take off. Please make yourselves comfortable and we will serve refreshments soon after take off.'

The hangar doors opened as Aaditya commanded it and the vimana slid out and started a gradual climb. When it settled in level flight at about ten thousand feet, he dug into the area behind his seat and pulled out a cake.

'Black Forest. Your favourite.'

When they had eaten, he took the vimana into a gentle climb, going into the upper stratosphere. They could see the stars gleaming bright with no cloud cover to obscure them, and the full moon above them.

'All for you, my love.'

All of Tanya's worries about whether they should be out in the vimana dissipated as she saw the stars ahead of her. They flew for a few minutes and then started to return to base. Tanya's eyes were moist, and she reached out to touch his arm.

'Thank you, this is the best birthday I've ever had. Not just because of the ride, but because I spent it with you.'

They kissed once more and then Aaditya guided the vimana back into the hangar. It was already close to four in the morning, and they went back to their room and slept.

The next morning, Aaditya was called to meet Brahma. When he walked into the meeting room, he was surprised to see all the Devas assembled there. Kartik was there, but unlike the previous night, he was not smiling at all.

Narada pulled him aside.

'Aadi, what were you thinking?'

'What?'

Brahma stepped forward. All the other Devas looked downcast, as if they wished this were not happening. For the first time, Aaditya saw anger blaze in Brahma's normally grandfatherly eyes.

'Aadi, do you have any idea of what you have done?'

Aaditya was now totally clueless and began wondering if this was some elaborate practical joke. Seeing his reaction, Brahma only got angrier.

'We all love Tanya, and understand your feelings for her, but do you realize the danger in which you placed all of us with your irresponsible action last night?'

It finally dawned on Aaditya what this may be about.

'Look, I just wanted to do something special for her birthday. I didn't realize taking her in my vimana would be a big deal.'

Brahma took a deep breath, as if trying to control his temper.

'Flying alone is a big enough risk. We know you are learning fast, but what if multiple Asuras had ambushed you? And what would have happened to Tanya?'

'But I thought…'

'The problem is that you did not think. If you had told me, or one of us, we could have sent an escort and you could have still taken her out, but going out like that without telling anyone betrays the trust we have placed in you.'

Aaditya searched for Kartik, and began to say that he had spoken to Kartik when he saw the slight sneer form on the young Deva's mouth. He had been set up.

He stood up straight, looking Brahma in the eye.

'I realize what has happened, and I am sorry if you feel let down. But I am also not a child, and will take whatever punishment you choose to give me.'

Brahma said the next words as if he were unloading a great burden. 'You are not to fly till further notice.'

It took a while for the words to sink in, and then Aaditya realized just how devastating a punishment he had been doled out. He started to protest, but seeing Brahma's unforgiving eyes and Kartik's smirk, he stopped himself. He had been wronged, but he would not debase himself by begging.

By the time he got to his room, word had reached Tanya and she just hugged him tight, not saying anything, knowing both how hard Aaditya would have taken it, and also realizing that she had something to do with it.

Aaditya sat down, not saying anything, just looking blankly at the floor. After a few minutes, Tanya tried to get him to open up.

'Aadi, it wasn't your fault. I'm sure they will let you fly in a day or

two when everyone has cooled down.'

Aaditya turned on her angrily. 'Of course, your precious Devas can do no wrong! I just have to sit and wait for their mercy.'

When Tanya recoiled back, Aaditya instantly regretted his words and reached out to hold her hand. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. But do you know what really happened?' And he told her everything. When Tanya heard about Kartik's scheming, she was shocked. 'You should have told Brahma.'

'Come on, why would he believe me over Kartik? Who am I after all to them?'

'Maybe I should talk to them.'

'No, please Tanya, don't. I don't want you to get into any more trouble. It was my fault to start with, and even if I can't fly, I have you, and I hope I made your birthday special. That counts for more than flying a stupid vimana.'

Tanya smiled, and the two of them sat together, wondering what the new day would bring.

Aaditya had already resolved not to make things any worse, especially after Narada came calling and told him that Brahma was a softy at heart and would very soon realize he had been too harsh. He had also decided not to seek out any confrontation with Kartik. He realized till he was in trouble, bringing any more attention to himself would not help his cause.

For the first time in weeks, perhaps months, without the constant thrill of flying, Aaditya got a chance to reflect on what exactly he was doing. He loved flying, and he loved Tanya, but beyond that, he had no idea of where his life was headed. What was the end point of all this? He realized that even in what he had considered his 'regular' life, he had gone through his daily routine not because he was certain of, or even aspiring to, some defined destination. It was just something he had accepted as a matter of routine. Now life was far more ill defined, but at least every day was a chance to do something he loved and was passionate about. And if he did get a chance to uncover the truth about his father, or to avenge his death, that was certainly something worth hanging in there for.

So he stayed out of trouble, and put on his best behaviour. Two days after Tanya's birthday, he was in the club, when he saw Kartik walk in. But Kartik did not come near him, choosing instead to sit in a corner of the room, avoiding eye contact with Aaditya.

That suited Aaditya just fine, because he was afraid he'd get into a fight if Kartik said anything. He got up, and was about to leave the room, when Kartik whispered to him as he passed him, 'I'm sorry.'

Aaditya stopped. 'All you have to say is that you're sorry? You screwed me after I trusted you. What the hell do you want now?'

'For you to forgive me and to have a drink with me.'

Aaditya was about to leave when Kartik got up and stood in his way. For a moment, Aaditya thought he wanted a confrontation, but Kartik seemed somehow shrunken, almost a shadow of the cocky self he had been.

'Sit please.'

Aaditya sat down as Kartik ordered two Somas and downed them in quick succession.

'When we first came here and men started thinking of us as gods, we were surprised and a bit embarrassed, and we tried telling them we were not gods. But it was of no use so we went about our work.'

'Do you believe in God?'

Kartik smiled at the question.

'We may have seemed godlike to them, but we certainly are not all powerful or all knowing. There is a power out there beyond all of us, and it's best that we respect it, even if we cannot always understand it. As you may have gathered, though we are from another world, our egos, our politics are not that different from yours.'

Aaditya thought back to what Kartik had recently done and snorted, 'You could have fooled me.'

Kartik continued without responding, as if he was keen to get something off his chest.

'While early man may not have been as technologically sophisticated as us, he certainly was an astute observer, and our squabbles, politics and internal struggles were recorded down in many of your texts through snippets of gossip and information leaked by humans we had kept as helpers or students to nudge them along on the path to progress. I can still remember some of the early scribes exclaiming in glee when they recorded just how screwed up the so-called gods were.'

Aaditya had no idea where this was leading or what it had to do with him, so he began to fidget. Kartik continued, as if not noticing Aaditya's lack of interest.

'In the Hindu Puranas, there's a fascinating story. My younger brother Ganesha and I are competing for the mango of wisdom that Narada has on offer, and we are supposed to race around the world. I do just that, but Ganesha just circles our parents, saying they are his world, and he wins. Do you know what that means?'

Aaditya had no idea, and just wished Kartik would get to the point.

'It means that despite me being the elder brother, he was always the favoured one, the smart one, the beloved of our parents. I was a grunt who had a talent for killing Asuras, nothing more. You see it in how humans remember us-Ganesha's statues are in hundreds of

millions of homes in Asia, regarded as a source of luck and fortune; I am remembered as a god of war.'

Aaditya began to see what was troubling Kartik.

'All my life, I have lived in his shadow, but at least had the consolation of being seen as the best pilot, of being the one my father would count on to march next to him in war. When you beat me with everyone watching on their displays, I just took all that rage out on you. I am sorry. I've already confessed to Brahma and you can fly now. As for me, I got an earful and am now grounded for a month.'

Aaditya didn't know what to say. As he looked at Kartik's face, he realized immortal demi-god or not, Kartik was also in many ways a young man with issues that he could understand and empathize with. He had no fancy words to offer, but thought back to how he would have handled the situation with any of his friends.

'Look, we all screw up some time or the other. You are the closest thing to a friend I have here, and I don't want to lose that. I can't help you with all your issues, but if you ever need someone to talk to, I'll be your wingman.'

That broke the ice. Kartik smiled and then roared in laughter. 'Four more Somas for us.'

They would have kept drinking more had Tanya not rushed into the club. She was surprised to see Aaditya and Kartik drinking together after all that had happened, but something else was on her mind.

'Tanya, what's wrong?'

'Another huge quake has struck. This time just off Hawaii.'

TEN

Aaditya, Tanya and the Devas sat huddled before a giant screen in the conference room. The screen was broken up into several portions, all but three of them showing news feeds from major TV stations. The remaining sections, arranged vertically along the right hand edge of the holographic display, showed real-time satellite imagery of various areas of the Earth, overlayed with coloured dots representing air traffic. There was a frenzy of green dots near the United States' west coast as rescue and evacuation efforts went into full swing.

The earthquake had struck just a hundred kilometres to the west of the island of Oahu, and while all the news reports said that rescue efforts had been launched, everyone knew that they would not reach before the tsunamis did. Aaditya heard Brahma mutter to himself.

'Nearly 900,000 souls live on Oahu.'

Reports were now coming in that the first tsunami waves would hit the coast in less than fifteen minutes. Residents all along the coast were said to be in a state of absolute panic, and roads were jammed with cars and people trying to get away. News helicopters were covering the disaster and Aaditya felt sick seeing the helpless people on the screens before him. Tanya had been busy looking at something on a handheld screen and suddenly she exclaimed, 'Ganesha, what time did the earthquake strike?'

Startled, Ganesha pulled up a screen. He quickly went through a series of news reports and the websites of various government agencies. 'The general consensus seems to be 8:03 a.m. local time. That's when the first seismic monitors picked up the tremors.'

Tanya sat back, a slightly shocked look on her face.

'Then why did the first email to news channels reporting the quake go out at 8 a.m.?'

Everyone in the room was staring at her.

'Are you sure?'

'I've hacked into the email servers of ABC, Fox and CNN. All of them received the same email, supposedly from the US Government. The point is the government's own sites don't report the quake as having started till three minutes later.'

'Maybe it's just an anomaly on the sites,' offered Indra.

'Or maybe someone wanted the news channels to cover the chaos,' said Tanya.

'Who?'

That question was soon answered when the satellite displays suddenly filled with red dots off the Hawaii coast. Aaditya counted at

least two dozen.

'Does Kalki even have so many vimanas?'

Brahma answered, his face grim with determination, 'He has hundreds. Only a few are piloted by Asuras.'

Kartik volunteered the rest of the information. 'The others are remotely controlled drones, or to use your terms, Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles. In terms of technology, they may be no more than ten years ahead of the UCAVs the US has under development, but he has a lot of them.'

'So what do we do?'

In response to Aaditya's question, Brahma stood up. 'This is a direct challenge. Whatever his plan is, it is clear that Kalki is behind these quakes. And by parading his vimanas like this, he is mocking us.'

Kartik was now standing up, his voice choked with anger. 'Send me and a dozen drones. I'll teach him a lesson.'

Aaditya could feel the rising tempers in the room, and wondered if the Devas were letting their emotions get the better of them. He looked towards Brahma, hoping the elder Deva would offer a voice of moderation. He was disappointed when Brahma thundered, 'We are not of this world, but our mission was to shepherd this world into development. I cannot sit by and watch any longer as Kalki slaughters thousands of humans in his quest for power. Kartik, I think it's time we showed them what we can do.'

Kartik raced out of the room to ready himself for the upcoming mission. Aaditya followed him to the hangar. There were at least a dozen new craft he had not seen previously. Each seemed to be shaped like a Deva vimana, but was less than half the size. He guessed these where the remotely controlled craft.

'Kartik, I'll come with you.' Kartik was already halfway into his cockpit when Aaditya called out to him.

'My friend, this is what our wars of yore looked like. Dozens of us against them. No prisoners, no mercy. You are a good pilot, perhaps even a great one, but I don't want to risk you in this mission.'

Aaditya rushed towards Kartik. 'We are a team. I'll come with you.'

Kartik looked down at him with eyes whose wisdom seemed to be belying his reputation as a mere jock. 'Aadi, Kalki is not new at this. He will have cards up his sleeve that we cannot see yet. You don't need to sacrifice yourself.'

'And you do?'

Kartik's expression turned to one of sadness and he entered his cockpit. 'I have already disgraced myself by betraying you. The least I can do is redeem myself in this mission.'

Aaditya watched as Kartik's vimana slid out of the hangar,

followed closely by the drones. He rushed back to the conference room to see what was happening. Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu were each sitting in front of the large display, their faces frozen in masks of concentration. Narada whispered to Aaditya as he sat down next to him. 'Each of them is controlling six drones with their thoughts.'

Aaditya felt a hand slide into his and looked to his right to see Tanya there. He watched the display as the nineteen dots representing the Deva vimanas appeared and then moved at high speed towards the US coastline. By now the first tsunami waves had struck and the death and devastation was being carried live into billions of homes by the news helicopters. There were still several red dots circling the disaster zone, as Kartik and the drones closed in.

Aaditya exulted as Kartik launched his first volley of astras from more than three hundred kilometres out, and his accompanying drones followed suit a second later. More than forty astras homed in on the Asuras at hypersonic speed. At such extreme range, the Asuras had time to react and no more than a dozen were lost to the first volley as the remaining Asura craft engaged in evasive maneuvers.

Within seconds, the blue and red dots were within touching distance, and the vimanas engaged in a swirling, furious dogfight. Aaditya turned to see the three senior Devas staring at the display in utter concentration. As one of the blue dots disappeared on the display, he saw Vishnu flinch, but then again focus on the unfolding battle.

Aaditya remembered something, and took out his flight ear plug from his pocket and inserted it into his ear. He could now hear Kartik. The young Deva's voice was methodical, almost calm, as he described the battle.

'Got one more Asura drone. They're sending the drones first, and we're swatting them like flies.'

Aaditya watched on the display as a couple of more red dots disappeared. This was indeed turning out to be a bit of a turkey shoot. Everything was going perfectly, but something was bothering Aaditya. He turned to whisper to Narada.

'If Kalki is indeed so smart, why has he sent his forces to be massacred like this?'

He was answered a split second later as Indra exclaimed.

'It's an ambush! Kartik, watch your back!'

Aaditya watched as the screen filled with dozens of red dots that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. He now heard Kartik's voice again, seemingly calm, but now more on edge.

'Ok, there are at least fifty of them behind us. I'll hold them, but I need help.'

A second later, he spoke again.

'Brahma, get your drones to cover me. There's no point in destroying their drones, I'm going for the Asuras who are hovering at their rear.'

Aaditya watched as Kartik's vimana sliced through the others. It was flanked by four more blue dots that destroyed a red dot each. Kartik was headed for the six large vimanas at the rear. Vimanas piloted by Asuras.

'Maya, there you are.'

Several red dots were now trying to encircle Kartik, and Aaditya looked at Indra, who just nodded. Tanya sensed what was about to happen and squeezed his hand. He gave her a kiss and then he was gone, following Indra out towards the hangar.

Within minutes, he and Indra were in their vimanas. There was no time to be wasted. Indra accelerated to more than ten thousand kilometres per hour and raced towards the scene of the battle. Aaditya was not far behind, rapidly climbing and then following Indra at the maximum speed he could extract out of his vimana. Yet, even as he sped to help Kartik at speeds human aircraft could not yet dream of achieving, he wondered if their help would be too little, too late.

***

More than half of the Deva drones had now disappeared from the display, while the number of red dots increased as fresh reinforcements arrived from their underwater base or carrier to more than make up for their losses.

Indra had to shout to get Aaditya's attention.

'Aadi, slow down a bit when we're four hundred kilometres away. Brahma is sending drones to help us, and they're not as fast as we are.'

'Kartik may not last that long!'

Indra's voice was now more even, as if trying to calm Aaditya down.

'I know how you feel, but the two of us will get overwhelmed. There must be more than thirty Asura drones there.'

'Indra, how do I know which are the drones and which the Asuras are piloting?'

He had barely said the words when his display changed slightly to show eight of the red dots glowing.

'Aadi, those are the Asuras.'

The closest red dot was now less than five hundred kilometres away. Indra had slowed down. A dozen blue dots were following them. Aaditya's display told him that they were still ten minutes away. As he saw three more of the Deva drones fall to the Asuras, he decided that those were ten minutes that Kartik did not have the luxury of

waiting for.

He saw four drones close in on Kartik from behind even as the young Deva downed one more drone. Aaditya's vimana screamed in towards the melee, firing a volley of four astras at extreme range at the four drones. Three hit while the fourth drone aborted its attack to evade the astra.

'Kartik, don't think you could grab all the kills yourself.'

'Join the party. Hold the drones while I get to the bloody Asuras. As usual, the cowards are holding back.'

Aaditya was now close enough to see the nearest Asura drone. To his surprise, the drone looked just like an F-22 fighter, painted entirely in black. Another drone to his left looked just like a Su-30, again painted in black.

'So that's why they were chasing all those high-performance fighters. They've engineered their drones based on our designs.' Aaditya said to himself.

He moved his vimana right behind the F-22, still using his clenched good luck charm like a joystick. He could see the drone just a kilometre ahead, and as he focused, a red circle appeared on his cockpit screen. He had been trained in using the optically guided aiming system for the vajra by Kartik countless times and now he was putting all those lessons to use.

He moved his head slightly to target the drone, and the red circle followed his gaze. When it was on the drone, Aaditya fired two bursts from his vajra. Blue streaks reached out towards the drone. While the F-22 rolled away from the first streak, the second caught it on the right wing, causing it to explode in a bright fireball and then disappear in a mist of flame and sparks. The Su-30 was trying to get on Aaditya's tail, but he took his vimana into a tight roll that brought the drone right in front of him for a fleeting instant. Another burst from his vajra and the drone exploded. He finally took a look at his display and saw a dozen red dots disappear.

Indra and the reinforcements had arrived.

As Indra and the drones accompanying him cut a swath through the Asura drones, Aaditya saw that Kartik was now headed straight for the Asura vimanas, which had not yet joined the fray. The Asuras fired several missiles at Kartik, but he destroyed a couple with his vajra and evaded the rest. His first volley of astras brought down two Asuras. Aaditya now raced to help him. Kartik had come off on top in the first volley but it was still just him against six Asuras.

One of the Asuras was trying to maneuver behind Kartik when Aaditya caught him with a burst from his vajra, slicing the Asura vimana into two before it exploded. Now with five versus two, and given the huge superiority the Deva vimanas had, the odds were more

than evened. Aaditya loosed two astras to destroy another Asura before he saw the red-tipped vimana scream towards Kartik.

'Maya.'

Kartik had just destroyed another Asura and not noticed Maya coming in behind him. Aaditya fired an astra but Maya rolled out of its way, continuing his relentless approach towards Kartik. At less than a thousand yards range, Maya fired two missiles.

'No!'

Aaditya watched in horror as both of them hit Kartik's vimana and the craft briefly glowed bright red before exploding in a huge fireball. Then, as Aaditya had by now seen several times already, the explosion seemed to collapse upon itself till a single, incandescent spark remained. The spark glowed as bright as the morning sun for a moment and then there was nothing.

His mind a red mist of rage, Aaditya closed in on Maya. One of the Asuras was trying to cut him off, but in his anger, Aaditya smothered him with no less than six astras. Maya had seen him, and began a rapid dive towards the ocean. Aaditya was now no more than five hundred feet behind him. He fired two astras, but to his frustration, Maya swerved and evaded both of them. Aaditya realized that in his rage, he was not focusing and was shooting wildly. He stilled his mind and brought up the optical sight for the vajra.

One burst just missed Maya, who by now was moving his vimana in a series of tight turns as he descended towards the ocean in a spiraling dive. The other seemed to have clipped an edge of the saucer shaped vimana, but Maya kept continuing his descent, though he was now wobbling a bit from the near miss.

Aaditya glanced at his display to see that he was no more than three hundred feet above sea level. He slowed down, otherwise he would have slammed into the ocean, and then watched open-mouthed as Maya continued his dive.

What the hell was Maya doing?

Then, in an instant, Maya's escape plan became clear. The water churned as through the blue-white foam a dark shape emerged. Aaditya watched as a giant sphere of some sort emerged and a gap opened in its side where Maya's vimana entered. Aaditya fired several bursts from his astra, watching the blue streaks track in on the giant black submarine. To his chagrin, gun ports on the sub's side spat out streams of red light that intercepted his weapons. Then, as he watched in frustration, the sub slid under the water and disappeared from sight.

Aaditya pulled up from his dive to take stock of the situation. There were no more red dots on his display, but there were also only a handful of blue dots left. Indra pulled up alongside him and he soon

heard the Deva over his earpiece.

'Aadi, let's go back. Our work here is done.'

Indra's voice sounded strangely subdued, and Aaditya asked the question on top of his mind.

'Kartik?'

He was met by silence, so he persisted. 'It's only been a few minutes since he was hit. He told me we could recover you Devas if we had a couple of hours. Come on, what can we do?'

Indra was silent, and then he simply said, 'Let's go back. There's nothing more we can do here.'

His was mind in turmoil, rebelling at the thought of abandoning Kartik, yet hoping against hope that the Devas had some solution up their sleeves. Aaditya followed Indra and the remaining drones back to their base.

When they landed, Indra disembarked and walked to the conference room without saying anything to Aaditya. Aaditya found the Devas all silent, staring at the display in front of them. CNN was reporting that there had been at least five thousand confirmed deaths from the tsunami, and the death toll was only likely to rise as the full extent of the disaster revealed itself. Tanya was in a corner, her eyes red, as if she had been crying.

Indra sat down soundlessly next to Shiva, betraying his emotions with a simple touch on Shiva's arm. Shiva just sat there, and as Aaditya entered, for the first time, he thought he saw tears well up in his eyes. Aaditya still did not entirely understand what had happened and still harboured hopes that Kartik could somehow be revived. After all, the Devas seemed to be indestructible, didn't they?

Brahma was the first to speak. 'My heart cries for all the souls lost in Hawaii and for our Kartik.'

Aaditya was still in a daze. 'Kartik told me that Devas had a couple of hours in which they could be revived. Surely you can do something?'

Nobody spoke till Shiva walked up to Aaditya and put his arms around him. 'Thank you for what you did today, and for trying to save Kartik. We are warriors and for us, loss is something we must learn to deal with, but for now, let me go and grieve with Durga for the loss of our son.'

Shiva walked out slowly, and Aaditya felt tears streaming down his face. Having seen the evil that Kalki was capable of, he was now convinced that his father could never have served such a monster. His mind kept replaying the dogfight, wishing he had reached sooner, wishing he had at least managed to destroy Maya when he had the chance.

'We have an incoming audio message.'

Ganesha's words got everyone's attention.

'Play it.'

On Brahma's command, a section of the giant holographic screen turned blank and Aaditya heard a voice that he realized with a shock he had heard before.

'Greetings, Father. Hello my enemies, old and new.'

It was Kalki.

***

There was pin drop silence in the room as Kalki's message continued.

'Many ages ago, you began this war against me. I never started any aggression against the Devas. If only you had let me do as I saw fit with the humans, with my creation. You began that war, but I will finish it. What you are seeing today is but a small preview of what I have in store. I will have what is rightfully mine. This world and its inhabitants will be shaped as I see fit, and you will be able to do nothing but watch. Save yourself more loss and grief, and go back to that pretentious alliance. Humans are my offspring, and I will watch over them, better than my own father watched over me.'

Aaditya saw even the normally unflappable Brahma flinch as the message ended.

'Why don't you just nuke his base?'

Vishnu answered Aaditya. 'We considered that. First, if he is underwater, there's no telling we'll get him, and if he retaliates in kind, then billions could die on Earth. We could not risk destroying this world again. Second, even if we succeed, what would we say to the humans? Why would they trust or believe us if we unleash a nuclear war on their planet?'

'So, what do we do?'

Brahma was now pacing the room, his hands folded behind him. 'It is a peculiar stalemate. We cannot get him in his lair, and he cannot get us. But we cannot just wait to see what new evil he has in store.'

Aaditya remembered what Kalki had said in the message he had sent through Maya. 'Does he know where our base is? Why doesn't he attack?'

'Because we still have one trump card.'

Aaditya waited for Brahma to explain, but Indra brought up a display on the screen. It showed the Earth, with dots orbiting it.

'Satellites.'

'I don't understand.'

'Aadi, when we returned here, we had our satellites crisscrossing the Earth to offer us near total surveillance. But when Kalki returned,

we quickly took out each other's satellites in a space war that humans were oblivious to. Since then, neither of us has our own satellites up in space. Kalki is thus blind outside of his short term sensor range of his vimanas and his base.'

'Are we as well?'

Indra smiled.

'So Kalki thinks.'

Ganesha pointed to several of the dots circling the Earth that were now blinking.

'I've hacked into several of the US and Russian spy satellites and put in a couple of our special sensors into them. The humans don't even know it, but through them, we get twenty-four hour coverage of the Earth. Every time an Asura vimana takes off, we know.'

Indra tapped the screen. It showed a video of a missile in flight, and then disappearing as a bright blue light connected with it.

'1968. That was the year Kalki discovered our base. He launched four nuclear missiles. We saw them the moment they took off, and we intercepted them. The US and Russia also picked them up and put their strategic forces on alert. Ganesha had to mess around with their computers so they thought it was a malfunction in their radars. Otherwise, the Cold War you humans talked of would have turned very hot.'

A chill went down Aaditya's spine as he realized the implication of what he had just heard.

'He launched four waves of vimana strikes. Again, as soon as a single vimana took off, we were ready. We ambushed and slaughtered them. He doesn't know how we did it, but he knows he cannot attack us here.'

'So, what do we do?'

Brahma sighed.

'If only we knew the secret to Kalki's base. If only we knew how to break through his defences. If only we could get even a small glimpse into what's happening inside his base.'

Aaditya realized that as omnipotent and powerful as the Devas seemed, they were as clueless as he was now. They disbanded, planning to meet the next morning.

Aaditya had a rough night. He kept thinking of Kartik, of his last conversation with the young Deva. Not able to sleep, he called Tanya, and the two of them sat near the hangar, both gripped with despair and sorrow at Kartik's loss. He held on to Tanya, and she tried to comfort him, but she knew the guilt he felt would perhaps heal only with time.

At about four in the morning, when Tanya had finally fallen asleep with her head on his shoulders, Aaditya fell into an uneasy

slumber, his mind a jumble of thoughts. The dogfight, Kalki's message, the stalemate the Devas found themselves in, the sudden spurt of tsunamis, Kalki's reference to his father, Kartik's death. All the disjointed thoughts swirled in his mind, as he tossed and turned, and then he had a sudden flash of clarity.

When Tanya woke up, Aaditya debated whether or not to tell her about his plan. At first, sure that she would refuse, he decided that he would go straight to Brahma, and if he agreed, then try and convince Tanya. However, when he saw her looking into his eyes over breakfast, he realized that he could not do that to her.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

Aaditya just smiled and asked Tanya to join him for a walk. They walked all over the base, covering the length and breadth of the hangar, then walking to the underground chambers where some of the Devas slept and where their research and production facilities were hidden away. Aaditya brought Tanya to a bench overlooking a repair area for vimanas, where Indra's vimana was currently being tended to by two robotic mechanics. Over the dull hum of the machines, Aaditya told her what his plan was.

Tanya refused outright. Then, when he told her the full story, she fell silent. She held on to his hand, as if unwilling to let go, as if afraid that once he left, she would never see him again. Finally, she kissed him and held him so tightly it felt as if she would crush him. Then, she simply let his hand go. She kept sitting there, staring into nothingness, as Aaditya got up and began his long walk to the conference room to meet Brahma.

'Are you out of your mind?'

Aaditya had guessed that Brahma would not welcome his plan, but even he was surprised at the outright rejection from the elder Deva.

'What other choice do we have? Did you yourself not say that the only real way to find out a weakness in Kalki's base was to get someone inside?'

'And why should Kalki ever believe you? Why would he not just kill you as a possible spy?'

Aaditya thought about that for a second. He had not yet told anyone other than Tanya about the message he had got from Kalki, and even now, he was not sure he should be revealing it to the Devas. He was less worried that they may question his loyalties, but that if they ever got to know that Kalki himself had reached out to him, they would never let him go. And with that would disappear any chances of his ever getting to know what had really happened to his father.

'Brahma, I'm not sure he will believe me, but you yourself said that his biggest weapon is temptation. He knows the one human

weakness he can count on to exploit-our greed for money, for power. He has been doing that for years now. I could pretend that I have been seduced by an offer of money or power?'

By now, Indra, Vishnu, Shiva and Narada had come into the room. They had overheard much of the exchange and Vishnu spoke next.

'Aadi, it is brave of you to make such an offer, but there are too many unknowns. He may never believe you, the Asuras may just kill you outright the moment they see you, even if you do make it inside, and there is no way we can guarantee we can get you out.'

'And, my boy, there is also the risk that if he does want to extract information from you, you end up revealing too much of what you really know. After all, being the one human to have got so involved in our struggle, what you have in your head is what would make you most invaluable to Kalki.'

Aaditya started to protest at Indra's suggestion, but the Deva stopped him.

'Aadi, I know you are brave and you will say that you won't do anything like that, but even the strongest and bravest man will break under torture, especially the kind of torture Maya and his underlings are capable of dreaming up.'

With all the Devas against his plan, Aaditya began to lose hope. Suddenly, Ganesha burst into the room.

'Turn on the display. There's a message from Kalki.'

Kalki's voice boomed across the room once more. This time, his message was as short as it was menacing.

'Bye bye Bali.'

Aaditya watched as the Devas quickly brought up various news channels on their display. They all had the same leading news. An earthquake measuring over 8 on the Richter scale had struck the sea just off Bali. A monster tsunami wave was reported to be forming in the water.

Aaditya felt his pulse quicken, and his eyes sting from the tears that were beginning to form. How many thousands more were going to be sacrificed in this hellish game that Kalki seemed to be intent on playing? By now, the quakes and their devastating aftermath had become only too predictable, and as the Devas watched their satellite display, ten red dots appeared over Indonesian airspace.

'The bastard!'

Brahma spoke with a heavy sigh, ignoring Shiva's outburst. 'Turn it off. I don't want to watch more innocents be slaughtered without us being able to do anything about it.'

Narada had now come up behind Aaditya, and he felt Narada's hands on his shoulder, as if offering support. 'Brahma, perhaps the

boy's plan, as crazy and hopeless as it sounds, is the only chance we have.'

All eyes in the room turned towards Brahma, knowing that the decision was his to make. Aaditya watched with bated breath as the Deva seemed to be weighing the decision before him. Finally he said just two words and walked out of the room.

'Do it.'

ELEVEN

'One room for the both of you, sir?'

The question seemed an innocuous one, but the tone in which the receptionist asked it was pointed enough.

'Yes, please,' Narada replied nonchalantly.

As the receptionist got around to processing the paperwork, Aaditya pulled Narada aside. 'Is it really necessary for the two of us to share a room? I mean, she thinks we're a couple.'

Narada kept looking in the distance, scanning for any sign of trouble.

'Aadi, I don't care if she thinks we're going to have a bloody orgy in there. I cannot let you out of my sight before the Asuras make contact.'

Aaditya sighed as Narada fished out his credit card to complete the formalities. That was one of the elements of the plan Narada had hatched. He was sure that the Asuras monitored calls and financial transactions just as the Devas did, and Aaditya was most certainly on their watch list after his role in the battles. A hotel reservation made in his name was sure to attract the attention of the Asuras.

Aaditya and Narada took the elevator up to their suite in the ITC Maratha Hotel in Mumbai.

'I like the buffet breakfast here,' had been Narada's reply when Aaditya had asked him why he had chosen this particular hotel.

As they entered the room, Aaditya took stock of the accommodations and then told Narada that he was going to take the couch in the living area.

'No offence, but I really don't fancy us cuddling together at night.'

'I am heartbroken,' Narada replied in mock despair.

The rest of the morning was spent rehearsing their plan, and by lunch, they were ready to give it a go. Narada left first, booking a hotel car to take him for a supposed business meeting. Aaditya left ten minutes later, taking a car to the In Orbit Mall, which he'd read was the largest mall in Southeast Asia. Narada could not be sure, but he had bet on the fact that if the Asuras had been alerted, they would prefer to tail Aaditya, thinking him a softer target. He was the first human the Devas had let so deep in their ranks, and for him to be out and about so openly would mean that he had the Devas' full confidence.

The driver must have thought Aaditya was a tourist who had come to Mumbai for the first time in his life, the way he gawked at the crowds and traffic around him. Being around so many people after

almost a year made him feel like an alien. He was sure things could not have changed so much in a year for them to seem so strange to him-or had he himself changed so much?

Fifteen minutes into the ride, Aaditya's earpiece buzzed with Narada's voice. 'They are right behind you. Two ugly daityas in black suits and sunglasses riding a silver Honda City.'

Aaditya looked behind cautiously, and sure enough, they were there.

'Narada, where the hell are you?'

Aaditya could hear the Deva chuckle.

'In a taxi right behind them.'

As Aaditya's car came to a stop at the entrance to the mall, he felt his first real stab of fear. What had he got himself into? Now it was too late to back out. He would just have to carry through with the plan. The Honda was standing nearby, its engine idling. A security guard came over to tell the driver that he could not park there, but a glare from the giants inside the car sent the guard scurrying back. Aaditya just stood there, watching the daityas inside the car. It was a farce-they knew he was on to them, and obviously he knew who they were.

'Narada, what now?'

'If you go into the mall, they won't follow you in. In broad daylight, those freaks would attract way too much attention. So make your move here, and don't worry, we have your back.'

Narada was nowhere to be seen, but Aaditya didn't doubt that he was close. For that matter, for all his requests to go alone, he did not doubt that Shiva and the others were also near, ready to step in if things got ugly. Reassured by that thought, he walked over to the Honda. The two daityas looked at each other, and Aaditya thought he could hear them talking frantically. He smiled to himself. They would never have expected him to make the first move. He casually walked up to the driver's side and tapped on the window.

The daitya rolled down the window as Aaditya leaned against the door.

'I assume you are not following me because you want my autograph. Look, I don't have time to play games. Narada is expecting to meet me for lunch, and he'll be here in an hour or so. If that snake-eyed bastard is nearby, call him. I need to talk to him.'

The slightly stunned daitya whispered something into an earpiece and then asked Aaditya to get into the back seat.

'What kind of an idiot do you think I am? Get him to come here. We do this my way.'

The daitya took off his sunglasses, his red eyes blazing in anger, but he soon composed himself and asked Aaditya to wait.

'Someone is pushing their luck today. For a slave of the Devas, you seem to have a big mouth.'

Now it was Aaditya's turn to be surprised. He turned around to see Maya standing just a couple of feet behind him. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes and he wore a black suit like the daityas.

'Come with me. Let's take a little walk together.'

Aaditya and Maya walked inside the mall and sat at a coffee shop. As the two sat facing each other, going through the motions of sipping the lattes in front of them, Aaditya was torn by conflicting emotions. Here he was with the creature who had killed Kartik in front of his eyes, and who was responsible for the abduction, if not the death, of his father. Every bone in his body told him to lash out now and kill Maya, but he held himself back. Even if he did manage to kill Maya, it would mean that both the larger purposes of his mission would amount to nothing-stopping Kalki for the Devas and finding out the truth about his father.

'So, my crippled friend, what assistance may I provide you?'

Aaditya bristled at Maya's insult, but reminded himself why he was here.

'I have a business proposal for your master.'

'Tell me what you want and why I should not kill you here and now. You've caused enough trouble for us.'

Aaditya leaned forward, murder in his eyes. 'Because, you ugly son of a bitch, if you insult me once more, I'll vaporize you where you sit.'

He nudged Maya under the table on his thigh with the handheld vajra he was carrying. He felt Maya tense up, as if he had never expected Aaditya to be such a hard nut. That glimpse of vulnerability made Aaditya push his luck even more.

'And I will only talk to Kalki. I don't discuss business with servants.'

Maya took off his sunglasses to glare at Aaditya with his snake eyes, as if warning him, and then put them back on.

'Very well, here he is.'

Aaditya inserted the earpiece that Maya had handed him, and found himself talking to the one person who he both loathed and desperately wanted to meet.

Kalki.

***

Aaditya was now standing outside a bookshop. Kalki had proved to be as suspicious as all the Devas had predicted he would be. His very first question was why he should trust Aaditya.

'Because you don't have a choice.'

Aaditya heard a deep, throaty chuckle at the other end.

'That's priceless. Here is a puny mortal telling me I have no choice but to listen to his whims and commands. So, tell me, Aaditya, what makes you so invaluable to me that I should even waste a moment entertaining your proposals?'

Aaditya held his breath, with what he said next, the dice would well and truly be rolled.

'Because you may be plotting something, causing earthquakes by the dozen, but as long as you cannot wipe out the Devas, you cannot really achieve anything.'

'I can smash the Devas to bits.'

'Oh yes, I heard how your previous plans for attacking their base went.'

Aaditya could feel the anger in Kalki's voice as he spat out his reply. 'Enough! I had made contact hoping you could be of use to me like your father before you, but if all you want to do is to mock me, then don't waste my time.'

In one instant, Aaditya was reminded that it was not just he who held all the cards. Kalki must have sensed his hesitation and mercilessly pressed his advantage home.

'Oh yes, for all your bluster, I know who you really are. A lost boy, in search of answers, in search of the life and dreams he once had. I can give you all the answers you seek.'

'And I can tell you the secrets of how to defeat the Devas.'

Kalki laughed softly.

'After all they have done for you, you will betray them so easily?'

'The Devas have their agenda, and I have mine. I want the truth about what happened to my father, but that is not all. Soon you and the Devas will end your war one way or the other, but I will need to get on with my life.'

'Ah, yes. I had forgotten how much you humans covet the good things in life. What do you want? Money? A house?'

'Five million US dollars. I'll give the account details to Maya. I want the cash there tomorrow, then we can talk.'

'You do put a high price on your information. The money is nothing, but what guarantee do I have that you won't bolt?'

'I'll meet Maya here at the same time tomorrow. Narada will be coming soon, and I can't be seen with Maya. If I do go back with the Devas to their base, the money is of no use to me, and you know as well as I do that I cannot live long in the human world if I betray both you and the Devas. If anything, after all this over, I will depend on you honouring your side of the commitment more than you will need me.'

When he met Narada a few minutes later, and they sat down at a bar, Aaditya noticed that his hands were shaking. He tried to lay them flat on the table to still them, but they seemed to be moving of their own volition.

'Relax. You did great, from what you told me. Now just try and relax and unwind.'

Over the next few minutes, after Narada had made sure that there were no Asuras or daityas around, and got confirmation from Ganesha that their communications were secure, Aaditya was in a conference call with the Devas back at base. The first voice he heard back from the Deva base was Tanya's.

'Aadi, are you okay? God, I couldn't sleep all night wondering what you were getting yourself into.'

Aaditya reassured her that he was fine and then debriefed the Devas on what had happened. It was agreed that he would meet Maya the next day and see if indeed Kalki had taken the bait. He heard Shiva murmur, 'Aadi, either he'll take the bait or he'll decide the risk is not worth taking, in which case he'll probably just kill you out of spite. I will be there in my vimana like this morning, just overhead, watching for trouble and also will come by any time you need me.'

That night, alone in his hotel room, Aaditya found it impossible to sleep. More than anything else, there was the sheer nervous energy and anticipation about what was likely to happen the next day. The best case was that he would be taken to Kalki's base as a virtual prisoner. The worst case, well, didn't need much thinking about. Hearing Tanya's voice had also given him much to think about. Whatever the endgame was in the struggle between the Devas and Kalki, Aaditya now knew that he could no longer just think about himself. In all the uncertainty and chaos that lay ahead, Tanya was the only bright ray of clarity. He was in love with Tanya. That clarity was the only thing that gave him hope. No matter what lay ahead, he would do his best to get back to her.

The next morning, Aaditya got up early and ate sparingly at the breakfast buffet. Narada seemed cheerful to the point that it began to get on Aaditya's nerves.

'What's got you in such a great mood?'

Narada looked at Aaditya between bites of his croissant.

'At times like this, I always trust Shiva's advice. Believe me, he's been through more battles than most of the other Devas put together.'

'And what does he say?'

Narada wolfed down another bite and responded. 'He says that when you go into battle, go smiling thinking of all the people and things you love, and go with a full stomach having eaten all the things you love most and indulged in all the things you like.'

'Why's that?'

'So you go into battle reminding yourself of all those you are fighting for and want to return to, and in case you don't make it back, at least you won't regret not having indulged in the things you love one last time.'

Aaditya smiled as he understood the simplicity and wisdom behind the idea, and his mood lightened considerably. 'I know who I'll be thinking of, and as for any last minute indulgences, I think I know what I would like.'

So at ten in the morning, Aaditya logged in for one last sortie by *IndianBader*. He realized that even though he had logged in hundreds of hours of real flying and combat, he was very rusty when it came to the virtual version. Also, with his mind elsewhere, he really couldn't bring himself to concentrate. He returned to Narada and asked him if he could contact Tanya. Narada looked hesitant.

'Normally, before we establish any connections, we get Ganesha to sweep the area to ensure nobody's listening in.'

He looked at Aaditya again and then waved his hand.

'Go on.'

Aaditya had to wait no more than a second before he heard Tanya's voice over his earpiece.

'Hi, Aadi.'

She was trying to sound cheerful, but he knew what kind of strain she would be under. Part of him felt guilty for having put her through this.

'Tanya, just wanted to say that I love you and we will be together when this is all over.'

They talked for a few more seconds before he said goodbye. He turned to see that Narada had a serious look on his face.

'What's wrong?'

'Ganesha just sent a message. The satellites picked up twenty Asura vimanas taking off this morning and they are all hovering off the Mumbai coast. Kalki probably suspects a set-up and doesn't want to take any chances.'

Aaditya wasn't sure what that meant for their plan, so Narada spelt it out.

'That means Shiva or any of the other Devas cannot be seen flying near Mumbai, and I can't risk following you either, if we want to ensure that the plan is successful. Still want to go through with it?'

'Of course,' Aaditya said with much more conviction that he felt inside.

Back in their room, Narada asked Aaditya to hand over the earpiece and the handheld vajra.

'No point in them suspecting anything. Plus, they'll confiscate

them anyway.'

Then, when Aaditya had turned for a second, Narada chopped him in the back of his neck, sending Aaditya slumping unconscious to the ground. He was awakened by Narada splashing a bottle of cold water on his face. He sprang up, his head throbbing with pain.

'What the hell was that all about?'

Narada held a cold towel to Aaditya's head.

'Sorry, I had to do that. I've implanted a beacon in your body. Listen to this carefully-you can use it only once, and we will know where you are and try to get you. But you can use it only once, so you must get out of Kalki's base somehow if we are to rescue you.'

Aaditya rubbed his head.

'You could have just told me.'

Narada grinned.

'You can't reveal to them what you don't know. It's voice controlled, and it's programmed with a very specific code.'

'What do I need to say to activate it?'

'You need to sing the opening lines of "Leaving on a Jet Plane" at the top of your voice.'

'You've got to be kidding me.'

Narada shrugged.

'Hey, I'm the messenger. Ganesha thought it up. Take it up with him when you get back. Now get going, and good luck.'

And so, at about eleven in the morning, Aaditya set out for the mall in a hotel car, leaving behind any remaining shred of security and certainty that had remained in his life.

***

'Check if the money's there. It should be in the overseas account you had specified.'

Aaditya had no need to check. Just before he had left, Ganesha had given him confirmation that the money had indeed been transferred to the account.

'So, Maya, what now? It would seem that I am now at your disposal.'

Maya grinned, revealing sharp-edged teeth. 'If you were truly at my disposal, I would have made an interesting spectacle of you. But my master desires that I get you to him in one piece. Follow me.'

Maya and Aaditya sat in the back seat of the Honda City that the two daityas had been driving, and soon they set off on what seemed to be a meandering drive through the city.

'Where are we going? Or are you just lost?'

Maya snapped in reply, 'Shut up and sit back. We can't be flying

you out in broad daylight, so we'll wait till it gets darker and then get to the takeoff point.'

For the next three hours, Aaditya did little but fret, with Maya obviously enjoying his discomfiture. Finally, at 5 p.m., the car took the highway, and picked up speed. They drove for another hour before they came to a stop on the side of the road. Both daityas got out, holding handheld devices.

'No vehicles within two kilometres.'

'Now,' barked Maya.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the clouds had parted and the sun arisen again in the fading light. A bright light shone down over the highway. Aaditya saw a familiar shape descend and land next to the car. It was Maya's vimana.

'Get out quickly and follow me,' Maya barked at Aaditya.

Aaditya got into the cockpit, which had side by side seating like the vimana he had flown. However, as Maya took off, he quickly realized just why the Asuras seemed to have fared so badly in their aerial engagements with the Devas. While the Deva vimanas had seemed like something out of science fiction novels, with their thought controls and holographic displays, the cockpit of this vimana was not entirely unlike those of modern jet fighters. There was a glass heads up display and digital readings and screens of the sort that Aaditya had seen in magazine articles about the next generation of fighters. There was also a more conventional looking control stick. However, Maya seemed to be controlling the vimana with his voice commands, speaking in hushed tones into an earpiece. A voice controlled craft meant that at least his vimana would have an important reaction and speed advantage versus the other conventionally controlled vimanas the Asuras were supposed to have.

'I thought you only had kritika vimanas. Clearly you seem to have a mantric one. Still, if this is the best you have, no wonder you get wiped out every time you fight the Devas.'

Maya had taken off his sunglasses. He glared at Aaditya with his snake eyes, but said nothing. The vimana climbed to more than 20,000 feet and accelerated. The radar display was full of contacts, and Aaditya guessed that whatever their other shortcomings, the Asura vimanas were as stealthy as those of the Devas for Maya to be able to fly around with such impunity and no apparent fear of detection.

As the trip progressed, Aaditya found his curiousity and excitement gradually replaced by a growing sense of dread. Maya had said absolutely nothing to him since they had got inside the vimana, and it appeared that he had chosen to ignore Aaditya's initial insults simply because it was apparent who held the cards now. For all his

planning, Aaditya was now at the mercy of the Asuras, and as he looked at the wide expanse of the ocean below him, he began to wonder if his plan had been doomed from the start.

Maya must have sensed what was on his mind, and whispered to Aaditya with a gentleness that he would have put beyond the Asura. 'You need not worry. Kalki has said that you are to be treated very well.'

But any relief Aaditya felt dissipated as Maya followed through, bellowing in laughter. 'Of course, when he's through with you, he may decide to feed you to the daityas.'

Maya kept cackling as the vimana continued on its path. Aaditya saw on the display that they were now quite close to the area known as the Bermuda Triangle, and the vimana entered a gradual descent. He began to breathe deeply, trying to still his mind and not panic. The vimana descended below five hundred feet and then continued in level flight, seemingly barely skimming the waves below. Just when Aaditya began to wonder what Maya was planning to do, the vimana came to an abrupt halt, hovering in position. Then Aaditya gasped as a giant black sphere began to rise out of the water in front of him. Even though only its tip was out of the water, it totally dwarfed the vimana, and its surface was polished smooth and gleaming.

A panel slid open on the side of the sphere, and Maya guided the vimana into the dark tunnel it revealed. As they entered the tunnel, the panel closed behind them. The light from outside gradually disappeared, and the vimana continued down the tunnel in complete darkness. Aaditya had entered Kalki's lair.

TWELVE

A sudden explosion of light nearly blinded Aaditya. They had been traveling in absolute darkness for what seemed to be an eternity when the darkness suddenly gave way to bright light.

'Home sweet home.' Aaditya heard Maya mutter. He lowered his hands to see that they had had emerged from what appeared to be a tunnel into the light. What he saw beneath took his breath away. As far as the eye could see, the surface was covered in rolling, green fields. He could see corn, wheat, rice and other crops arrayed in neatly arranged farms. Even though they must have been more than a hundred feet above the surface, he could see unmistakably human figures tending to some of the crops. Maya must have guessed what was going through his mind.

'You didn't really buy the cock and bull story about us being servants of the devil condemned to a hell of fire and brimstone, did you?'

'Who are those people?'

Maya smiled as he looked at Aaditya. 'Humans who know their place.'

Looming over the horizon was a gigantic pyramid, covered entirely in what seemed to be gold, gleaming from the reflection of countless lights that were on the roof of whatever base they were inside. Maya continued his guided tour.

'Down here, night or day doesn't really matter, but we all spent so much time up there, that we like to pretend it is daylight. Plus, one day we will return.'

If this was hell, it certainly didn't look anything like what Aaditya had imagined. As they came closer to the pyramid, a panel slid open near the middle and Maya guided his vimana into it. The inside of the pyramid was a stark contrast of the outside. If the land outside resembled some bizarre underwater rural idyll, inside it resembled the fortress of an army. Heavily armed daityas milled around the vimana, as if they expected Aaditya to single-handedly destroy their base. Arrayed around the hangar were several other Asura vimanas and countless drones shaped like Su-30s, F-22s and other top-of-the-line fighter aircraft.

When Aaditya stepped out of the vimana, two daityas pushed him roughly to the ground, while another frisked him, a bit too roughly, as if on purpose. Another ran some scanner over his body. When Aaditya got up, he saw Maya smiling broadly, as if enjoying his discomfort.

'Now strip.'

Aaditya stared at Maya.

'You heard me. Strip. We can't be sure what you're carrying. Then put these on.'

He handed Aaditya some plain loose-fitting white clothes of the sort he had seen the people working on the farms outside wearing. He slipped them on, feeling the coarse cloth bite into his bare skin.

Before he could say or do anything, a daitya slipped handcuffs around his hands. He was asked to walk into one of the corridors leading out of the hangar, and at all times, he had two armed daityas ringing him, while Maya stayed a few feet behind. As menacing as they looked, he thought he saw nervousness in the daityas' eyes. They walked for what seemed to be several minutes and finally, unable to contain his curiosity, Aaditya turned around to talk to Maya.

'Look, I'm alone, unarmed and now your prisoner. Do you really need all this security and for me to be handcuffed like this?'

Maya leaned close, his rancid breath on Aaditya's face. 'My puny little cripple, we are not afraid of you, but we are all afraid of Kalki. Terrified, in fact. He has commanded that you be delivered to him without a scratch, and if you try something stupid and get hurt, all of us will get roasted alive. Get it?'

Aaditya just nodded and continued, now even more nervous about what lay in store for him. The corridor ended when it intersected another, this one lined with doors. Maya swiped a card in front of one of the doors and it slid open.

'Rest here till I come to get you.'

Maya unlocked Aaditya's handcuffs and as he entered the room, lights on the ceiling turned on. He tried opening the door but could see no way of doing it. He was truly a prisoner now. As he turned to look around the room, he saw that it was not too uncomfortable. The room itself was quite large, perhaps almost as large as his apartment back home in Delhi, with a thin wall partitioning the living and sleeping areas. There was a large bed in a corner of the sleeping area, with a comfortable looking mattress and pillows and a sofa set against the wall. There was an attached bathroom and a writing desk in the sleeping area with a lamp. Not having anything else to do, Aaditya sat down on the bed, wondering what he had got himself into. Now there was no going back at all-for all his planning and thinking, he realized that now he was going to be entirely at Kalki's mercy. He only hoped that he could bluff Kalki into thinking that he did indeed have something to bargain with, at least long enough to learn how the Asura base worked. As for getting away, Narada had installed the beacon, but first Aaditya would need to get back to the surface, or at least out of the base. It struck him that being sent on such a mission, which even he could see had gaping holes, told him just how

desperate the Devas really were. If he had been asked to volunteer for such a mission in any other circumstances, he doubted he would have had the suicidal courage to go through with it.

But he was here not only for the Devas or indeed only to help foil Kalki's plans. It was much more personal than that. If only he learnt what had really happened to his father, even this crazy mission would be worth it.

Aaditya lay down on the bed, and despite all his anxieties, dozed off for a few minutes. He woke up with a start, his throat dry with thirst. There was a jug of water and a glass on the table. He had poured himself a glass when he saw a photograph lying face down on the table. He picked it up, and turned it around to have a look, and dropped his glass in shock.

The photograph was one of him and his father. He remembered it being taken on one of his birthdays and showed the two of them standing before a MiG-29 fighter. His birthday gift that year had been a new watch, but what he had cherished most was getting an hour-long briefing on how the fighter's weapons worked, from his father and the chief maintenance officer at the base. Those fond memories were now replaced with a knot in his stomach-what was this photo doing here?

He opened the drawer of the study table and found a thin writing pad. The first page had a doodle of a fighter plane. He did not need anyone to tell him who had drawn it. His father had been a gifted artist, and he had seen numerous such doodles around the house.

Now Aaditya's mind was in utter turmoil. Was his father still alive? Had he been put in this room to share it with his father? His pulse pounding, he looked around to see what other signs of his father he could find. He rummaged through the bedside table and the living area but could find nothing else that would show that his father still lived in this room. He then saw a sliding panel in the sleeping area. With no visible controls to open it with, he stuck his fingers to push it open, but as he did so, the panel slid aside with a soft hiss.

It was a wardrobe. On a hanger was his father's old flight suit and helmet. The suit was torn in a couple of places and the helmet looked dented in several places, but it was unmistakably his father's flight suit, with the name 'Ghosh' embroidered on a patch at the chest.

Aaditya took a couple of steps back, his mind churning out the possibilities. Could it be true that his father had indeed survived the crash, and had worked for Kalki? Was it possible that his father was still alive?

Just then he heard a voice boom over some unseen speakers in the room. It was Kalki.

'Welcome to our humble home. I think now it's time I finally met

you.'

***

Ten minutes later, Aaditya was standing in some sort of control room. It was full of screens that covered the wall. Some of them showed what appeared to be radar displays while others showed grainy black and white videos that seemed to be real time visuals from drones or vimanas on reconnaissance missions. There was a large padded chair in the middle of the room with its back to Aaditya. He could not see who was sitting in it, though he had a fairly good idea of who it must be.

Maya, who had accompanied him to the room, seemed to have transformed. Whenever Aaditya has seen him previously, he had been aggressive, even cocky. But now he had his eyes lowered and spoke in a submissive whisper.

'I have him here, Kalki.'

'Go now and leave us alone.'

Kalki voice was deeper and more full throated in real life than he had sounded in his recordings or broadcasts. Maya and the others bowed deep and left the room.

Now it was just Aaditya and Kalki. 'So, tell me one thing. Why are you with the Devas?'

'Because you or your people killed my father.'

Aaditya had answered without thinking, and wondered just how true that was. And if it were true, then were his motives in siding with the Devas so selfish? Kalki chuckled.

'Honesty. I love that. You are honest and brave, but like so many of your people, you are also gullible.'

Aaditya realized that he was not really expected to reply, so he waited for Kalki to continue.

'Actually I don't blame you. You've had the very best deceivers to take you for a ride. Know who I am talking about?'

Again Aaditya kept quiet.

'Your Devas, that's who. For all their pretensions of trying to save worlds, they do enjoy the attention. That's why they secretly love being considered gods, and look at the fat lot of good organized religion has brought your world. People tearing themselves apart, in the name of god.'

As Aaditya listened to Kalki, he had to consciously remind himself that this was someone who had killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people, and not an innocent victim of the Devas' machinations. But Kalki was such a convincing speaker it was hard to not get carried away by his story.

'But you know what their ultimate deception is? The one that I find the hardest to fight?'

Another rhetorical question, another pause before Kalki proceeded. By now it was clear Kalki liked to do all the talking.

'Their biggest deception is that they have successfully demonized me in the eyes of my own children.'

The statement was so strange that Aaditya found himself blurting out, 'What do you mean your children? Where do they come into all this?'

Kalki laughed, a sound like that of an engine idling.

'My children. You. All of you. All the humans on this planet. I created the first of your ancestors, elevating you to become the dominant species on this planet from being little more than apes. And far from being treated as your creator, the Devas have labeled me as Satan, the Devil, Shaitan, call it what you will, while they enjoy the status of gods.'

He spat out the last few words.

'From what I have seen and heard, you've been quite liberal in killing off your so-called children to meet your goals.' Aaditya had found his courage and his voice, both born out of rising anger at Kalki's complaints and platitudes when just over the last few weeks, he had witnessed thousands of people dying due to the tsunamis unleashed by Kalki.

'When my children stray, I need to keep them in line!'

Kalki's voice had risen to a near shout, and Aaditya flinched as Kalki continued, 'You demonize me, you worship my sworn enemies, you deny me the world I shaped. And then you accuse me when I try and get you back into my fold! What has your independence given you? Genocide, wars, riots in the name of colour or religion? You humans have killed far more of your own than I can ever claim, and you lecture me about killing people!'

Kalki's voice was rising with every sentence, and Aaditya was beginning to get afraid that he would explode in rage and have him put away or worse even before he had a chance to put his plan, hare-brained as it was, into effect.

Kalki now stood up, and Aaditya immediately noticed two things. First, he seemed to be wearing a cloak that covered his head and his body, and second that he was huge. He was at least seven feet tall, if not more. He still had his back turned to Aaditya, so all Aaditya could see was his hulking size. Suddenly, Kalki's voice softened.

'You know Aaditya, it takes being a father, being a creator, to realize just how painful it is to be rejected by your own creation. You are yet young, so you may not realize it, but imagine how your father would have felt if you loathed him, if you loathed the very sight of

him.'

At the mention of his father, Aaditya's head snapped up. Before the rational part of him could tell him not to appear weak before Kalki, he said, 'What happened to my father? In the room I was in, I saw his things.'

Kalki sighed, his breath coming out with a mighty gust.

'We will come to that. Of course we will. That is why you are here in the first place. I don't think for a minute that you would betray the Devas only for money. But if the truth about your father is what you seek, then you must embrace the full truth about me.'

Aaditya wondered what Kalki meant.

'Aaditya, my greatest tragedy and the Devas' greatest triumph is not just that they have demonized me in your legends and religions. It is that my own creation has learnt to hate and fear the very sight of me. How can I stand before humans today and claim them to be my own? How can I convince them that serving me, their creator, is their destiny, when I have been made the object of horror and revulsion through the ages?'

Now Kalki was facing Aaditya. He was walking slowly towards Aaditya, his face still obscured by the cloak. Aaditya realized that Kalki was even larger than he had first guessed. Aaditya found himself looking up at a creature at least seven and a half feet tall and so broad that Aaditya guessed his shoulders must be at least three times as broad as his own. Involuntarily, Aaditya took a step back, as Kalki chuckled.

'Aaditya, you have seen nothing yet. My size alone is nothing. Come, judge for yourself. Do I really look so repulsive?'

With that, Kalki pulled back the hood covering his face.

Aaditya found himself facing a red-skinned creature, skin scaled like a reptile, and whose red eyes seemed to blaze with a flame. At the top of his head were curved horns, and as he threw off the cloak, Aaditya saw that Kalki's bare body was rippling with muscles and crisscrossed with burn marks and scars. Two giant, leathery wings unfolded from behind his back. Kalki began laughing, as Aaditya shrank back in fear and horror.

He realized that he had truly come face to face with the devil.

***

Some hours later, Aaditya was back in his room, his mind in utter turmoil. It was one thing to show bravado when inside the cockpit of a vimana, quite another to come face to face with a monster like Kalki. Knowing that he was now totally at Kalki's mercy made things only worse. What kept him going was the hope that he could yet learn

what had happened to his father, though it was hardly much comfort to contemplate the possibility that his father had served someone like Kalki. For his part, Kalki had refused to say much, saying that he would talk later at night, as he had urgent matters to attend to. However, he did say that Aaditya would find it well worth his time to go through his father's things and learn just how much his father had believed in Kalki's cause.

Aaditya rifled through the writing pad on the desk, but other than the doodles on the cover page, there seemed to be nothing else. He then took out his father's flight suit and began to go through the pockets. In one of the hip pockets, Aaditya found a sheet of paper. He unfolded it and spread it out on the desk. It showed many hand drawn diagrams with several equations and numbers in the margins. Aaditya had been an aviation buff, but this was too technical even for him. However as he studied the diagrams, he began to get the gist of what they showed. The top diagram showed the missile engagement envelopes of the weapons the Su-30 carried. The bottom diagrams were what appeared to be maneuvers that could defeat a Sukhoi in air combat. At least that was what he guessed from the diagrams of saucer shaped vimanas attacking Sukhois at their blind spots.

His mind began racing at the implications. There was no way his father would have carried such a paper on him before his take off, especially since they seemed to depict vimanas. His mind refused to admit the possibility, but if the paper did show what he thought it did, the implication was as clear as it was frightening.

His father had been collaborating with Kalki in teaching him how to defeat human fighter aircraft.

Aaditya folded the paper and put it in his pocket. If his father had not been able to resist Kalki, what chance did he have?

As the lights in his room began to dim automatically, apparently signifying night, the door slid open. It was Maya.

'Kalki wishes to have dinner with you.'

Kalki was seated at the head of a huge oak table, which seemed to be laden with platters heaped with fresh fruit and hot breads. He motioned for Aaditya to sit down on the chair to his right. Aaditya found his stomach grumbling at the sight and smell of the food, not having eaten anything all day.

'We grow our own bread and fruits, so these are as fresh as it gets. But the best is yet to come.'

He snapped one of his giant fingers and two daityas came in, holding aloft platters of grilled prawns that were bigger than any Aaditya had ever seen. Kalki smiled, his scaly skin stretching back as he did so, making him appear even more hideous.

'There are some advantages to being at the bottom of the sea.'

For a few minutes, they ate in silence, but as delicious as the food was, Aaditya's mind was full of questions. Finally Kalki wiped his fingers and looked at Aaditya.

'So, tell me, having spent so much time with the Devas you must have lots to share that I don't know. Where shall we begin?'

'How about my father?'

Kalki chuckled.

'You, my friend, have very little bargaining power, but let me respect what your father did for me. When we first heard that a human had suddenly become so involved, I was intrigued, but look at how fate works-when we ran your name, turns out you were none other than Ghosh's son.'

Aaditya put the bread down on his plate and looked straight at Kalki. 'What really happened to my father? Is he still alive?'

Kalki met his gaze.

'We picked him up to learn more about the aircraft and its capabilities, to aid us in our plans. You see, after I was cast away by the Devas and spent years in exile, I did not have access to all the developments the Devas brought in their technology and also I was surprised to see how fast humans developed their own technologies after they recovered that Deva drone at Roswell. As you've seen for yourself, our vimanas are not really a match for the Devas and barely ahead of the best human fighters. That was why I was trying so hard to learn more about their technologies and tactics to create a fleet of unmanned drones modeled on human fighters to combat the Devas. But when he began to learn more about who we were and the nature of the struggle we waged, he chose to side with us.'

Aaditya's skepticism must have shown on his face, so Kalki stopped.

'You don't believe me.'

'Look, I know my father better than you and I can't understand why he would ever choose to side with you.'

'Tsk, tsk, the Devas have indeed brainwashed you well. Good and evil are so easy to understand when you think of them as black and white concepts, but reality consists of so many shades of grey. The Devas want to rule over you as gods. All I wanted was to give humans the freedom to choose. Call me a capitalist and them benevolent socialists. That's all the difference there is between us.'

Seeing that Aaditya was still not convinced, Kalki continued with his account.

'So he acted as my adviser on how best to both reach out to humans and how to defeat my adversaries in the air.'

'What happened to him? If he served you so well, why is he not around?'

Kalki looked at Aaditya, surprise in his eyes.

'You mean you really think I killed him? The ones who killed him are your beloved Devas.'

Aaditya's mind refused to believe that. He began to get up, but Kalki held his wrist with a vice-like grip.

'That's why I wanted to meet you. If nothing else, I hoped that you would want to avenge your father and help me against the Devas.'

As suddenly as he had gripped Aaditya's wrist, he let it go.

'The choice is yours. Now, sleep over it and let me know what you choose tomorrow morning. I do hope you choose to cooperate.'

There was no menace in Kalki's tone of voice, but the burning embers in eyes made Aaditya shudder. He was walking back to his room, escorted by Maya, when suddenly a loud siren rang out. Maya grabbed his hand.

'Run, come on!'

Maya dragged him along the corridor till they reached his room, and then faced him as the door slid open.

'Something's going on. You get inside your room and wait till I come for you again or Kalki sends for you.'

With that, Maya was gone, sprinting down the corridor. Aaditya was about to enter his room when it struck him. In his hurry to get away to deal with whatever had happened, Maya had forgotten to put Aaditya inside the room and lock the door. Aaditya was now standing at the threshold. If he walked inside, the door would close behind him. He thought about it for a second and then stepped back out into the corridor. Aaditya would explore for himself what exactly went on in this underwater world that Kalki had created for himself.

THIRTEEN

'Help me! For God's sake, please help me!'

Aaditya had been nearly knocked off his feet by the man who had run into him and before he could recover, the man was holding on to his hand, pleading with him.

Aaditya had been exploring the corridors of Kalki's fortress when he had stumbled upon a steep spiral staircase that seemed to lead deep underground. A good thirty minutes of climbing down the stairs led him to a narrow corridor then to a brightly lit area. He was about to return to his room when the man had stumbled into him.

Aaditya pulled the man into the shadows and in the dim reflected light of the, he got his first good look. The man was emaciated, as if he had not eaten well for days, his ribs sticking out prominently through the thin white vest he wore. His eyes looked desperate, even crazed. His white hair was matted with sweat and clung to his scalp.

'Are you one of them? Are you one of them?'

The man kept asking Aaditya the same question over and over again. Over his shoulder Aaditya saw two shadows moving across the corridor ahead. He flattened himself against the wall, clamping his hand over the man's mouth to keep him shut.

He peered around the corner to see two daityas, each carrying large axes, walk into view. One of them paused just a few feet from Aaditya.

'Looks like he got away. Maya will have us skinned alive if he gets to know.'

The other daitya shrugged.

'Where the hell will he go? Sooner or later we will get him.'

As they disappeared from view, Aaditya removed his hand from the man's mouth. Realizing that he was safe for now, the man slumped to the ground. Aaditya sat down next to him, and turned to look. The man was white, and when he spoke, Aaditya realized that he was most likely American.

'Where the hell have you come from? I haven't seen a man as well fed as you in years.'

Aaditya didn't quite know where to begin. Why was this man running free in the heart of Kalki's fortress? He answered with a question of his own.

'Who are you?'

The man stood up straight, and Aaditya realized that he stood as tall as him.

'I am Colonel James Lafferty, United States Air Force. You can call

me Jim.'

'You're an US Air Force Officer? What the hell are you doing here?'

The man put his hand to his lip, motioning for Aaditya to lower his voice.

'Look, kid, you're not one of his spies, otherwise I'd be demon feed today. I don't know who you are but if we hang around here, we will be found sooner or later. Come on.'

The man ran through the corridor, Aaditya struggling to keep up with him. Jim hoisted himself up to what looked like an air vent. He removed the grill and climbed in, then held out a hand for Aaditya.

'Come on in.'

Aaditya followed him, crawling on all fours through a narrow shaft for several minutes. Jim kept taking abrupt turns and Aaditya had a tough time keeping up in the near total darkness. Finally the man stopped.

'Here we are. Home sweet home.'

They climbed down another vent and Aaditya saw that 'home' was a narrow space, probably lodged in between the walls. There were two cardboard boxes in a corner and a dirty mattress. Jim motioned for Aaditya to sit down on the mattress, and then reached into one of the boxes to pull out a bottle of water, which he emptied in a few gulps.

'Ah, that feels good. Today I thought I was done. Years of running like a rat have made me a bit jumpy.'

Aaditya saw the man reach into the folds of his baggy trousers and stood up in alarm when he took out a large, curved blade of the sort he had seen Maya and the daityas carry. The blade seemed to be covered with blood, which the man wiped dry on a cloth he took out from a box. Now Aaditya was really worried and he stepped back, wondering what he had gotten himself into. Jim looked at Aaditya, his soft eyes at odds with the bloody weapon he held in his hands.

'Kid, tell me your story.'

'It's a long one. I don't know where to begin.'

'Start at the beginning. What's your name?'

Aaditya nodded and the man fished out two apples, tossed one to Aaditya, who bit into it before answering. 'I'm Aadi. Look, Colonel, Jim, how do I know I can trust you? For all I know, you're one of Kalki's men.'

Jim laughed, taking a big bite of his own apple.

'Aadi, the blood on the blade was from one of the demons who was chasing me. I got one, but three to one is odds too great for me at my age. As for trust, I'm the one who's taking a risk. I've been hiding out here for almost two years, and at last count, I've taken out at least

twelve of the demons. If *you* work for that horned bastard, then I'm the one who will be roasted alive. So don't talk to me about trust.'

After that Aaditya related his entire story starting from the battle at the Old Fort, and then what had happened over the past year. The man's eyes widened when he heard about the Devas and how they had been locked in a war with Kalki and his minions for millennia. He almost whispered, 'So there is hope. We all thought Kalki was just waiting to take over our world and there was nobody to stop him.'

'We?'

Jim looked at Aaditya quizzically, then smiled.

'You have no idea how many people are down here. At least five thousand men and women are kept as slaves to grow food, clean the place, serve food and so on. And then there are the two hundred or so military types. All of them kept in cages, no better than animals.'

Aaditya's mind boggled at the numbers. He had no idea that so many people were kept here as captives. Jim continued, 'Those stories you hear about alien abductions, all those people who seem to be loony bins talking of flying saucers carrying them off-many of them are truer than we'd ever have cared to believe possible.'

'So, you were abducted as well?'

A wistful look came into Jim's eyes.

'Desert Storm, 1991. I was flying an F-15 Eagle over Iraq. Saw a bogey flying low and thought it was an Iraqi trying to get to our troops so I hit the deck and chased him over the Persian Gulf. Bloody saucers ambushed us and splashed us. They picked me up, but my wingman didn't make it. From what you told me, sounds like you at least got some payback on those saucers for all of us. Now how do you plan to get out?'

Aaditya confessed sheepishly that he hadn't really thought that part of his plan through.

'Man, you are on a suicide mission. I wouldn't have cared but if these Devas can help stop Kalki, then we need to get you out. Come on, we need to call a meeting.'

'A meeting? With whom? I thought all the people here were prisoners.'

'Kid, they captured us, but that doesn't mean they broke all of us. There are others like me out there. We have no hope, or a real plan of ever getting back to our lives, but we won't make it any easier for these demons. Let me get a meeting arranged, and then we'll see how to get you out once your mission is done.'

***

Two hours later, Aaditya was in a small opening beneath what

appeared to be the main Asura hangar, judging by the sound of vimanas or drones taking off and landing virtually every minute. Half an hour of waiting later, Aaditya was beginning to doubt Jim and wonder if the man he was with was a crazed and delusional prisoner of the Asuras. A few minutes later, his doubts disappeared when he saw four more men appear. One was a tall black American who introduced himself as Deuce, a former US Navy pilot. Another was a slight Russian called Pavel, who said that he had been a test pilot in the Russian Air Force. The third was a Chinese man called Lim, who had commanded one of the Chinese strategic bomber squadrons before he had been captured by the Asuras, and the fourth was a wiry man called Michael, who refused to say any more than the fact that he had been in the Israeli Air Force.

'So, Crazy Jim, why call us here? You know those demons are always sniffing around and I don't want to hang around here a minute longer than I have to.'

Jim addressed Michael, though it was apparent that he was speaking to all the men gathered around. 'We have lived like mice for years. We hide, and once in a while we come out and bite, but at the end of the day, let's be honest to ourselves, what we do hardly matters in the larger scheme of things.'

Aaditya noted that Jim seemed to have struck a chord somewhere, since all the men fell silent. Then Jim pointed at Aaditya. 'This kid could change all that. Aadi, tell the guys what you've been up to.'

Aaditya had not really been prepared to share his story with a large group, but as he began speaking, he saw a visible change in the attitude of the assembled men. Even if subtly, their eyes began to change from showing little more than poorly disguised skepticism and contempt to one of awe. Aaditya began to realize that he was the first sign these men had seen in years that there was some hope beyond waging a desperate, and ultimately futile guerrilla campaign against Kalki and his army in the heart of his base.

Michael was the first to speak. 'Kid, you need to tell them about the narrow window of opportunity they have. We can kill a frigging demon a week, but at the end of the day we are waging a losing battle.'

'What do you mean?' Aaditya asked.

Jim answered. 'Aadi, there are at best ten of us who have escaped and are fighting back. The others have given up, and serve Kalki out of fear more than anything else. But till you got here, none of us had any real hope that anyone could stop the horned bastard. You need to get out and tell the Devas what we know.'

'And what is that?'

'Come with me.'

Jim clambered into another narrow vent, with Aaditya and the others following close behind. A good twenty minutes of scrambling along on all fours later, Aaditya climbed down into another narrow enclosure where there was a woman waiting for them. She hugged Jim and the other men when they climbed down.

'Jesus, thank God you're okay.'

Jim introduced her to Aaditya. 'This is Major Leslie Johnson, of the United States Strategic Air Command, and the commanding officer of the resistance movement down here.'

The wiry woman looked Aaditya over, and then motioned for Aaditya to follow her. All of them walked through the passageway till it intersected with a wall. It seemed to be a dead end, but as Aaditya watched in fascination, she lodged her knife into a corner and pulled out one brick. She then used her bare hands to pull out a few more till there was a small hole in the wall. She squeezed through it and asked Aaditya to follow. He could see only darkness through the hole and hesitated, but Leslie hissed at him to hurry. 'Come on, we don't have all day!'

He was halfway through when Leslie grabbed his hands and pulled him through, making him land in an ungainly heap at her feet. When he sat up, the first thing that hit him was the stench. The smell of human waste, the smell of rotting food. Then he saw the bars. He realized then that he had entered a prison cell. Leslie was in a corner, turning on a small lamp that served to provide the only light in the cell.

'Where are we?'

Leslie smiled. 'This has been my home for the last five years or so, but down here one does tend to lose track of time.'

'You're a prisoner here? But Jim said that you lead the resistance here.'

'To Kalki and his demons, I am the most pliant prisoner they could hope for, but then I slip out that hole and hook up with Jim and his boys to raise some hell. Being here means that I have the ability to stay in contact with the other prisoners and also the civilians they keep as slaves outside the fort.'

Aaditya was beginning to realize that a whole lot more was going on under the surface at Kalki's fort than he had ever imagined. Leslie offered him a glass of water with a sad smile.

'I'm afraid that's all I can offer by way of hospitality.'

Then she began her story. 'When they got me, I thought I had lost my mind. But then I realized what they wanted with us military types- nuclear launch codes, details of bases, tactics and technology. It became obvious that these guys may or may not be aliens or

whatever, but their plan was clearly to try and invade Earth at some point.'

'So what did you do?'

'Eventually, I told them whatever they wanted.'

Seeing the surprise and shock in Aaditya's eyes, she continued. 'Forget what you see in the movies and read in novels-every human being has a threshold beyond which they break. I fought them as long as I could, but they broke me. They broke all of us sooner or later.'

Aaditya saw the pain in her eyes and realized that he could not even begin to guess the hell she had been through.

'I lost all hope, we all did. Many of us killed ourselves, some of us lost our minds and were killed by that snake-eyed bastard for sport.'

A chill went through Aaditya's spine.

'We had no way out, nothing to look forward to, so we tried to create some semblance of normality in our miserable lives. We'd look forward to the hour a day when they'd let us out into the light. We'd wait for those few minutes when we could be out in the fields and meet the civilian slaves. They forbade us to talk to each other, but we'd just look at each other, hold hands, and cry together. That's what we had been reduced to.'

Aaditya heard Jim whispering something through the hole in the wall, and Leslie cursed under her breath. 'Damn, I almost lost track of time. The guards are due for their rounds soon. We need to hurry. Jim will get you back to where you were being kept.'

'If you had all given up, where and how did your resistance begin, and what do you know about how anyone could destroy this base?'

'Come closer.'

As Aaditya walked towards Leslie, she picked up the lamp and shone its weak beam of light at the wall.

'A man came here. He started it all. He gave us hope that we could fight back, that it was better to go down fighting than to live like animals.'

Aaditya looked closer at the wall to see what she was trying to show him. He caught his breath as he saw etched into the rock wall, the unmistakable hawk and lightning bolts of his father's squadron patch.

***

'Where the hell did you wander off to? We've been looking for you for hours.'

Aaditya was still so affected by the story he had heard from Leslie that he had scarcely noticed Maya nearly run into him. Jim had somehow managed to get him near where his room had been, and he

been loitering around outside the room for a few minutes, waiting for Maya or one of the daityas to find him.

'The door just wouldn't open so I was walking around trying to find someone who could help.'

Maya smirked as if he didn't believe a word of it. He looked around for a while, making sure there was nobody else with Aaditya. Jim and his fellow guerillas had figured out all the hidden vents and pipings that the daityas either didn't know existed or had never thought a whole group of humans could be living in, under their very noses. Jim had told him that the daityas knew there were people like him around but they apparently never raised most of the incidents to Maya, afraid of the punishment they would receive for their failure in letting the humans escape. So a largely hidden and bloody battle was being waged in the shadows. Unable to spot anything suspicious, Maya gripped Aaditya hard by his arm.

'Don't think I don't know what goes on here. I know about the bloody human rats, and if any of them bumped into you, just know I will personally crush each of their skulls soon enough.'

Aaditya pretended to not know what Maya was talking about and wrenched his hand free.

'Take me to your master. I have nothing more to tell you, nor do I think I owe you any explanations. Kalki wanted me, and I would like to speak with him as soon as possible.'

Maya glared but led Aaditya to the command center where Kalki was seated, wearing the dark cloak that covered most of his face.

'So, Aaditya, I hear you've been giving Maya some anxiety with your disappearing acts. Now, tell me why you wanted to meet me.'

Kalki had a smile on his face but his red eyes showed little humour in them.

'I've thought things over, and I have decided to tell you about the Devas. But first I'd like to know what exactly happened to my father. Where did he fit into your plans and what caused his death?'

Kalki motioned for Maya to leave them alone.

'As you know by now, I was building an air force of drones to fight the Devas. I am short of pilots and the daityas, while good at muscle jobs, aren't exactly the types to master complex technology. We had a limited stock of vimanas of our own, and unlike the Devas, did not have much access to the technology and materials needed to make more.'

Aaditya took it all in, cross-tabbing it with what he had learnt from the Devas and from Leslie. As liars went, Kalki was a consummate one, using just the right mix of facts. As a fugitive, Kalki had no more access to the advanced technology that he and his crew had come with, while the Devas still got regular shipments from

space. But he knew that the drones were hardly meant for fighting the Devas. They were going to be used to one day invade Earth.

'I needed experienced pilots to help us master the drones and tactics they could best use. Your father resisted me, as they all did initially, but he had the vision to understand what I was fighting for. He realized all the evils the false gods and religions of the Devas had unleashed and I could help bring about true freedom for humans: the freedom to choose their own destiny.'

Aaditya had to struggle to contain his rising anger. He had heard what had really happened. Human pilots had been tortured to give up secrets that would make Kalki's conquest easier, many pilots becoming the subject of grotesque experiments to try and create pliant zombies who would fly on Kalki's side against their own race, to make up for the small number of Asuras Kalki had with him. As Kalki kept talking about how his father had worked to help Kalki, Aaditya felt his gloom and anger lifting, replaced by a warm feeling. A feeling of intense pride and love.

His father, the gentle man who had brought him up, and had been the only family he had known. His father, the one who had watched cartoons with him, and read to him every night. His father, the one man who had dared to stand against Kalki. The one man who had sacrificed his own life so that others may live, and had created a spark that had given Leslie, Jim and others like them hope that they could live, or at least die, like human beings, not animals or slaves.

His father had indeed pretended to side with Kalki, and if not a trusted aide, then at least the way Kalki saw humans, as a favoured pet. He helped Kalki create the first drones based on advanced human fighters and even took part in trying to train the zombie pilots, a terrible experiment that killed dozens of men and women but never produced any pilot who would fly on Kalki's command.

He had come to understand Kalki's plan. Kalki had about a hundred Asuras at his command and about forty vimanas. Supplemented by the hundreds of drones, and the thousands of daityas he planned to clone to wage war on land, Kalki would have a force with which he could begin to put his plans of world conquest into motion. Perhaps his father had not yet seen the other aspect of Kalki's plan — the series of tsunamis that would devastate and cripple governments' ability to respond to the sudden attack by his forces that would follow.

One day, his father had taken off in a fully loaded Sukhoi, his first flight outside of Kalki's base and what was to turn out to be his last flight. He had been flanked by three vimanas, to ensure he did not attempt escape, his job being to test fly the drone, which was being commanded remotely by Kalki, and fly it back manually if the remote

controls did not work. He had worked with two experienced test pilots, Jim and Leslie, and had taken their help, enrolling them in his plan. As they had flown out from the underwater base, everything had gone according to plan. As they flew back in, his father had faked a malfunction and jettisoned his fuel tanks as they were entering the opening to the tunnel that led to the base. Three of the tanks bounced off in mid air, as if they were hitting an invisible wall, but one magically enough went in through the opening, right through the tunnel, and landed on the fields below. At one stroke, he had uncovered the one weak spot in the defensive field-the narrow window when vimanas were entering or emerging from the narrow tunnel entrance.

Alerted that something was going wrong, Maya had ordered him back to base, and perhaps realizing that there was no way to escape, his father had turned on his afterburners and flown back into Kalki's underwater fortress. Kalki tried to control the drone, but his father had planned for it and put in a manual override. He then smashed his fighter, loaded with thousands of pounds of jet fuel, into the main hangar at near supersonic speed. The giant fireball incinerated him and his plane in seconds, but also obliterated most of Kalki's fleet of vimanas parked there, and killed all but a handful of the Asuras. At one stroke, he had set Kalki's plans of conquest back, and created new hope for all the human slaves toiling in the fields below. They had finally seen that someone strike back at their demonic captors. Without realizing it, Aaditya's eyes filled with tears, and Kalki put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, thinking that he had been overcome by Kalki's telling of the story, where his father had supposedly been shot down by the Devas while he had been test flying a drone. Aaditya looked him straight in the eye, vowing to end what his father had started.

FOURTEEN

'Come on, Kalki is asking for you again!'

The way Maya said the word 'again' Aaditya wanted to laugh at his petty jealousy, but he knew that he was living on a knife's edge. The last three days had been a nerve-wracking experience. For all his newly discovered friendliness, Kalki would kill without a second thought at the first hint of deception.

The first test of his loyalty would be critical. When Kalki had asked him to tell some secrets of the Devas, Aaditya had not instantly volunteered it. Narada and Indra and gone through the plan with him umpteen times, and at the end, their advice had helped him survive.

He had told Kalki about the one weakness of the vimanas-the fact that their sensors went blind when they rendered themselves invisible to the naked eye. So if someone could lure them into a situation where they were forced to use their invisibility, and at the same time attack them from the air with the Asura's own vimanas or from the ground, they would for once not have the seemingly invincible edge in sensors and weapons they otherwise seemed to possess.

The very next day, he had been invited back to Kalki's command center for a test. A radar display showed an area over Afghanistan, beamed back from a high-flying drone. Maya and four pilotless drones based on the stealthy F-22 fighter were loitering over northern Afghanistan. In the valleys below, a team of daityas was prowling in the shadows with Al Qaeda terrorists, planning to execute a spectacular attack on a US base. Aaditya guessed this was another attempt by Kalki to aid Al Qaeda in return for having them do his bidding. As Aaditya watched the display, he saw three dots representing vimanas of the Devas appear on the screen. They would have picked up Maya and his drones now, and two of them established a patrolling pattern over the area, ready to shoot them down if they interfered. One of the vimanas came closer to the ground, and by now Aaditya assumed it had gone invisible so as not to be seen by the daityas and their terrorist acolytes. In the past, faced with such a situation, Kalki would have feared committing his forces to battle, assuming that the Deva vimanas would pick up his every move, but now he knew that the vimana close to the ground was effectively blind.

Kalki had not told Aaditya what he had planned, but as Aaditya saw the plot unfold, he began to worry that he would indeed cause one of the Devas to die. A single Asura vimana had been lying still on the floor of the valley, all its sensors and engines off, covered by radar

absorbent sheets. On Kalki's command, it rose vertically into the air and attacked the Deva vimana. The Asura pilot launched a volley of missiles that the other Devas must have picked up since the Deva vimana near the ground suddenly began evasive maneuvers and the other Devas obliterated the attacking vimana with a barrage of astras then proceeded to wipe out the daityas and their followers. Aaditya heard Maya's exultant voice.

'I think we got at least one hit! He's trying to limp back to base. Should we chase them?'

'Get back, you fool. Now that they know our game, they will swat you out of the sky.'

Kalki had looked at Aaditya in a totally different light since that moment. He had learnt that the Devas were not actually invincible in the sky, and most importantly for Aaditya, he had come to trust him. So Aaditya had been moved to a luxurious room and allowed more freedom to move around some areas of the base.

Maya had resented this, but with Kalki insisting that Aaditya be now treated as a valuable asset, he had little choice.

'Come in, I thought it's time I allowed you see the bigger picture.'

As Aaditya entered the command center, Kalki put down an ancient looking clay tablet on the table in front of him. The tablet had columns of strange symbols etched on to it.

'What is this?'

'This is the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar. Nowadays they just call it the Mayan calendar. The earliest examples date to perhaps the 2nd century AD, but they created a firestorm of controversy when people started interpreting them.'

'What's so special about them?'

Kalki smiled as he reached out to run his long talons along the surface of the tablet, making a screeching noise that grated on Aaditya's nerves.

'Have you seen the movie *2012*?'

Aaditya remembered the special effects thriller he had seen on DVD a couple of years ago. The connection struck him.

'It said that the Mayans knew the world would end in 2012, right?'

'Not just 2012, Aaditya, but one specific date. December 21, 2012.'

Aaditya remembered some more of the movie and another connection formed in his mind.

'Tsunamis, tidal waves wiping out civilization. Is that why you're…I mean, do you know if this is actually going to happen and you're trying to make it worse with the tsunamis you plan to create?'

Kalki looked at Aaditya indulgently, like an adult smiling at a

child who has just said something intelligent.

'Aaditya, I have no idea whether the Mayans knew anything or not, and don't know if anything will happen on that date because some ancient priests saw visions brought on by drugs. What I do know is what I will make happen on that day.'

A sinking feeling came over Aaditya.

'Your legends and religions are quite clear. The Mayans had their end of the world, and the Bible actually says that when the Day of Judgment comes, the waters prevail upon the Earth. So I will give them what they predict. On that day, the oceans will rise under my command and swamplands. Then as your holy books predict, I will emerge as the God returned to reclaim his children and cleanse the world of sin.'

Aaditya couldn't help but stifle a laugh at the thought of the massive, horned monster standing before him trying to pass himself off as God. Kalki snorted in anger, and Aaditya quickly wiped the smile off his face. Trusted or not, he knew that he couldn't push his luck too far.

'Fool, they will not see this form of mine. This hideous mutation was caused by the weapons my father and his followers unleashed on me. I could have had them treated, but I carry them as a reminder of the injustice that was done to me. No, they will see me as I once was.'

A door slid open, and a holographic figure slid into the room. Aaditya gasped as he saw what Kalki had once looked like. Still seven feet or more tall, but with flowing blonde hair, a chiseled face, a physique that looked so perfect that it deserved to belong in a museum immortalized in a statue than on any mortal being. The only words that came to Aaditya's mind were-a Greek God.

'Your blind faith and superstition, which the Devas have thrived on, will be turned against them. My children will once again be mine. If the Devas choose to fight, I will fight, aided by my human followers, bringing to life your own legends and prophesies of Armageddon. With the help you will give me, we will wipe them out once and for all. The Devas may be powerful in the air, but I am cloning an invincible army of daityas that no power on land can resist. The false gods will fall, and I will take what has always been mine.'

Aaditya felt numb with fear as the full extent of Kalki's plan hit him. He had only a couple of months now. He had to find a way to get out of the base and back to the Devas.

***

One of the benefits of his newly found favourite status was that Aaditya had been given a room with a view. His room had large glass

sliding doors leading to a small balcony that overlooked the fields far below. Aaditya had not been sure where exactly he had been in the giant pyramid, but the first time he stepped on to the balcony, he had felt almost giddy. His room was near the very top of the pyramid, which itself was no shorter than the highest skyscraper Aaditya had seen. The gleaming gold pyramid towered over the humans toiling in the fields below, reminding them who really was in charge here. Kalki may have intended the room to be a reward for Aaditya, but seeing the ant-like figures of men and women working away in the fields below made him feel even sadder. So many lives snatched away, so many families destroyed, all so Kalki could build and feed his army of monsters. But the vantage point had its advantages. Aaditya had observed when the military prisoners, housed somewhere in the pyramid, unlike the civilians who lived in slums just outside the fields, were brought out for their daily walks. The long line of men and some women would walk out in single file, their feet manacled, the daityas watching over them, mingle briefly with each other, savour the artificial sun and wind and then go back to the dark isolation of their cells.

The next day, having taken permission from Kalki, Aaditya walked near the fields, watched by a guard behind him. As the prisoners came out, he saw Leslie at the head of the group. Their eyes met for a second, but nothing was said. The prisoners dispersed and began to talk to each other in small scattered groups. Aaditya walked closer to Leslie. The other prisoners watched, some warily, others with open hostility. His clean clothes and appearance stood in stark contrast to their own filthy clothes and unwashed and unshaven looks. Leslie nodded to a man next to her and as Aaditya watched in horror, he ran towards Aaditya's guard, kicking him in the groin. The stunned daitya doubled over in pain, and the man ran into the fields, screaming at the top of his voice. Absolute mayhem broke out as the other daityas ran after him. Leslie pulled Aaditya into the nearby fields, where they were hidden behind some bushes.

'Quick, tell me what you've learnt and what you want to do!'

'That man…'

'That man was called James and he was willing to die so that we could help you get out. Now tell me what you know so his death will not be in vain. We don't have much time.'

So Aaditya, stumbling over his words, told her what he knew and that he had to somehow get outside the underwater base where the Devas could get him. He saw Leslie's face darken as she understood Kalki's plan.

'Kalki must not know that you betrayed him, otherwise he will bring forward or change his plan.'

'How do I manage that and still get out of here?'

'You need to die.'

'What?'

They could now hear the daityas shrieking in triumph, an unearthly sound that told them that James had been caught. Leslie closed her eyes and Aaditya could only imagine the pain and loss she must have endured over the years.

'Look, go back now. We can't risk them knowing you're anything but the loyal dog they think you are. Lemme talk to Jim and the boys and we'll get a plan.'

'How do I contact you?'

Leslie smiled as she got up and rejoined the other prisoners.

'You won't need to. We'll find you.'

The next day was spent talking long hours with Kalki who seemed to be very interested in what each of the Devas was up to. In particular, he wanted to know how Shiva had taken the loss of Kartik. When Aaditya told him of Shiva's grief, Kalki practically gloated in triumph.

'Now he knows what loss feels like.'

Aaditya tried hard to control his anger as Kalki continued, a slightly glazed look in his eyes. 'I had so many with me, Asuras who believed in our way of life, and then they were all wiped out when the Devas crushed our city. All those lives lost will be avenged soon. The waves will wipe out the humans who shunned their creator.'

Aaditya came back to his room, which he now had the freedom to enter or exit at will, provided he didn't go to any other level without informing Kalki. He was troubled at how unhinged Kalki seemed to be getting as his plan came closer to execution. Earlier, Kalki had at least tried to put on a veneer of justification to what he had been doing. Now, he seemed to be acting more out of spite and anger than anything else.

There was a knock on the door. A daitya was outside. Maya wanted to know more about what had happened outside earlier in the day. They were walking towards the elevator when a scraping noise came from a dark corner of the corridor. The daitya walked over to investigate and suddenly reeled back, grabbing at his neck in agony. Two pairs of arms reached out and pulled him towards the partially open vent. Then Aaditya heard Jim's voice.

'Kid, find a way to be at the main hangar tomorrow night and try to grab a ride in a vimana. We'll do our best to ensure no other craft gets out to intercept you. You've got to figure out the rest. Good luck.'

Just as he turned to walk away, Jim slipped something into Aaditya's hand. When Aaditya looked down, he saw the long and thin blade that the daityas seemed to favour.

'Why the hell am I supposed to be babysitting you here?' Maya growled.

Aaditya enjoyed seeing Maya angry about his growing influence with Kalki. He rubbed it in, hoping that being angry would make him careless and less prepared for whatever Leslie, Jim and the others had planned.

'Because Kalki asked you to, and from what I gather, when it comes to what he wants, your opinion counts for little.' Aaditya answered.

Given Aaditya's love for flying, Kalki had not at all been surprised when he had requested to be allowed into the hangar to see the Asura vimanas and drones up close. Now Aaditya was not just waiting with bated breath for what was going to happen, but also taking in Kalki's forces. For the first time, he realized that Kalki's fleet of vimanas was small-perhaps no more than ten craft. Kartik's actions had inflicted crippling losses on Kalki's vimanas. There were at most a half dozen Asuras-large humanoids, all with deformities to their skulls and bodies in the form of small horns, an extra limb or in the case of one, two heads, results of the radiation or poisoning that the weapons of the Devas had inflicted on them millennia ago. Fearsome as they looked, they were few in number. Aaditya realized just how thin Kalki's capabilities really were in the air. He felt a surge of pride as he recalled Leslie's account of his father's last flight. His father must have taken out several Asuras and their vimanas with his last act of defiance.

'Maya, come on, you know I asked to be taken on a flight with you.'

Maya groaned, his exasperation clear, but Kalki's instructions had been just as clear. Given how thin his bench of pilots was, Aaditya wondered if Kalki's largesse was also driven by the hope that other than sharing information, Aaditya may actually be cajoled to fly on their side.

Maya's vimana rose vertically and then swept out over the fields. Aaditya saw a dark opening on top of the spherical dome. That would have to be the way to the surface. They entered and after a few minutes Aaditya saw the thin light of a moonlit sky as they emerged out of what appeared to be a tunnel opening. He turned in his seat and saw a large sphere disappear into the water behind them. He had seen it before in Japan and when Maya had escaped back into the base after the battle where Kartik had been lost. He guessed Kalki had a fleet of submersibles that detached from the dome and carried vimanas to the surface in the attached tunnels.

After two weeks in Kalki's base, being outside was an exhilarating sensation. But he had no time to savour his newly found freedom. He

had no idea what Leslie's plan was, but without the element of surprise, he would have little or no chance in a one on one struggle with Maya. A voice screamed over the vimana's intercom.

'Maya, there are human prisoners in the hangar!'

'What the hell is going on there?'

Then Aaditya heard the sound of explosions and screaming in the background. He had never really considered himself very religious but found himself praying for Leslie, Jim and the others who were probably sacrificing themselves so that he would have a chance. He took a deep breath, readied himself and began singing the song that would hopefully bring the Devas to his rescue.

'All my bags are packed and I'm ready to go…'

***

Maya heard Aaditya singing aloud and cursed himself for letting down his guard. As he turned around to see what Aaditya was doing, he Aaditya's right hand coming up at him, something sharp and shiny in it.

Aaditya shouted in exasperation, as his first blow just seemed to nick Maya's shoulder. The Asura was wounded, but he was hardly out of the fight. The intercom was now filled with the sounds of explosions, but Aaditya had more immediate worries.

Maya struck out at Aaditya with his right hand, rocking Aaditya back, his head striking the canopy. Aaditya brought the blade up again, connecting with Maya's right wrist. The Asura grabbed at his wrist in pain but when Aaditya tried to strike again, he knocked the blade out of Aaditya's hand.

Maya's left hand was now around Aaditya's throat, and with his right he was trying to reach for a weapon he had holstered at his waist. The vimana was now at an altitude of perhaps a thousand feet and had come to a standstill as the two occupants fought for their lives. As Aaditya felt Maya's grip on his neck tighten, he hoped that the Devas had picked up his signal and would be coming soon.

'I should have gutted you when I had the chance. You are a treacherous dog like your father was!'

The mention of his father gave Aaditya new found strength and he leaned closer to Maya, brought his head up, the top of his head making hard contact with Maya's chin. Maya was unbalanced by the sudden move, and his grip loosened. Aaditya seized the opportunity and landed a blow on Maya's exposed neck with his right hand. Maya seemed to be winded for a second but then quickly recovered and struck back with an open handed blow to the face that sent Aaditya reeling back, bleeding from the nose. Aaditya was fighting with all the

strength, anger and desperation he could muster, but even he knew that this was a battle he had little chance of winning. Maya was just too strong and too quick for him to take on in hand-to-hand combat. But if these were going to be his last moments, he would take Maya with him. The monster who had destroyed his life by capturing his father, and had later killed Kartik, would not walk away today.

As Maya loomed over him, trying to strangle him again, Aaditya kicked out at the control panel with his right foot. The vimana suddenly lurched to the left and Maya was thrown hard against the wall. Aaditya grabbed for the weapon from Maya's holster, but before that Maya had picked up the blade Aaditya had dropped. He brought it down hard on Aaditya's right thigh. For a second Maya looked down at the blade sticking out of Aaditya's thigh uncomprehendingly, wondering why there was no bleeding or pain.

And Aaditya resolved never again to curse the fact that he had one artificial leg.

Before Maya could recover from his surprise, Aaditya brought up the weapon in his hand and fired a burst at point blank range into Maya's chest, and then another burst as Maya fell back hard, a spider web of cracks showing in the canopy where the Asura's head had struck it.

Before Aaditya's eyes, Maya seemed to implode in on himself, his body collapsing into a red-hot dot and then reduced to a pile of smoking ash. That was when Aaditya knew he had perhaps finished himself as well. His second burst had opened a gaping hole in the side of the vimana, the craft was beginning to wobble dangerously as the cold air streamed in. Aaditya jumped into the pilot's seat but before he could do anything the vimana entered a nosedive.

He suddenly heard Kalki's voice boom over the intercom. 'Maya, we've been under attack in the hangar, but all the attackers are dead or gone. What is going on up there?'

With the last reserve of courage he had, Aaditya tried to still his mind. Even if he didn't make it, he didn't want Kalki to discover his deception.

'This is Aaditya,' he said, grabbing an earpiece lying near the pile of ashes.

'Where's Maya?'

Aaditya's mind raced, trying to think of something to say. 'They must have sabotaged the vimana. There was an explosion. Maya is gone and I'm about to crash. I don't know what to do.'

He heard Kalki bellow in rage as the vimana impacted the water. A split second later freezing water streamed in through the hole. He swam out, gasping at how cold it was. Once he had been a good swimmer, but now tired from the fight, slowed down by his artificial

leg, and in the freezing ocean waters, the best he could hope for was to paddle about and try and survive long enough till the Devas got there.

His whole body felt numb, and he began to give up hope. He looked up at the night sky, bright with stars, and watched as a couple of the stars seemed to blink brighter than the others. He was slipping into shock rapidly. Then the stars seemed to come closer. He thought he heard someone calling out to him. He heard a splash in the water nearby and strong arms grabbing him. He was too tired to resist, even if it was Kalki himself, but the last thing he saw before blacking out was Shiva's smiling face.

'I've got you, son.'

FIFTEEN

The first thing Aaditya felt were Tanya's lips on his own, a wonderful and welcome sensation. He drifted in and out of consciousness, but remembered two things that kept him going. One was the knowledge of what his father had done and the second was hearing Tanya repeating that she loved him and was waiting for him. When he finally came to, Tanya was by his side, holding his hand, tears streaming down her face.

'Hey, beautiful.'

Tanya hugged him close. If it hadn't felt so good, he may have asked her to give him some space, since his body still felt like it had been in a car wreck.

'Thank god you're back.'

Aaditya looked at her, cupped her chin in both his hands and kissed her. 'Tanya, I love you. More than anything or anybody else in the world.'

The next few days were spent filling in the Devas on what he had seen inside Kalki's lair, and about the one weakness in Kalki's base that he had learnt of.

'December 21 is just a couple of weeks away. We should just hover nearby and attack whenever any craft takes off from his base.'

Brahma looked at Shiva and silently shook his head, indicating his disapproval.

'Shiva, if we just hover around his base all day, he'll suspect something is wrong. We need to wait for the day before we act.'

Indra was sitting in a corner, lost in thought. 'Aadi, we should just launch a few nuclear weapons down that bloody tube when his craft come out. We can deal with them in the air and the nukes will wipe out his base.'

Aaditya didn't need more than a split second to respond, Leslie and Jim's faces looming large before his eyes. 'There are thousands of innocent people there. We can't just slaughter them to get to Kalki.'

Shiva started to object, but Brahma raised his hand, as if indicating that the debate was over. 'The boy is right. If we stoop to that level, we are no better than Kalki. Indra, we need to have a plan ready. The challenge is we need to time it with Kalki's plan. If we act too soon, he will suspect something is wrong.'

That evening, Aaditya was seated with Tanya on a perch overlooking the main hangar. Their hands were intertwined, her head on his shoulders. For the first time, he had told anyone else about what he had learnt about his father's last moments. He had not

realized it at first, but his eyes had filled with tears. Tanya held him tight.

He finally left her only when Shiva sent summons to join them for a meeting. It was a chaotic affair, with every one of the Devas having his or her own opinion about what to do. Aaditya walked away feeling more than a little afraid. For all their power and technology, it was clear that the Devas had not really figured out any real way of stopping Kalki.

On his way back he bumped into Ganesha, who called him over into his room, where he had been sitting in front of his monitors.

'I've called Narada and Tanya as well. I thought we could chat about an idea I have.'

Aaditya had never seen Ganesha this intense before, his normally jovial features obscured by a mask of intense thought.

'Ganesha, what's on your mind?'

'Here they are. Folks, just gather around.'

Both Narada and Tanya seemed as clueless as Aaditya.

'They're going about this all wrong.'

Ganesha was pointing in the direction of the conference room where the other Devas were assembled. Narada tried to say something, but Ganesha continued speaking, cutting him off. 'They are angry, and they are afraid, and so they are doing nothing more than react to Kalki. We cannot win if we just wait for him to make his move.'

Narada raised an eyebrow, the closest Aaditya had seen the otherwise unflappable Deva to losing his cool. Ganesha seemed to notice and raised a placating hand.

'Hey, I'm not just complaining about them. I do have a plan where I think you and Tanya can help.'

Tanya had been listening in silence but at the mention of her name, she spoke up. 'Ganesha, you heard what Kalki's plan is. We don't have a whole lot of time, and with the kind of chaos he has planned, I don't know what I of all people can do to stop him.'

Ganesha looked at Aaditya. 'Kalki told you that he was planning all of this to make it seem like the end time prophecies of various religions were coming true.'

Aaditya nodded. 'Yes. The Mayan calendar, the Biblical Armageddon, the Hindu myths of the end of Kalyug. Every religion has predicted an end of the world as we know it, and he's going to set it up and project himself as the God who has come to claim his chosen ones.'

'You know, Aadi, Kalki may seem crazy but once he was really bright. Spending all these years alone, feeling that everyone he once knew is against him, and with nobody to talk to other than

psychopaths like Maya and those daityas, he probably has started to believe all this.'

Aaditya thought back to the gleam in Kalki's eyes as he had been talking about his plan.

'He does seem a bit….unhinged, I guess. I don't know about crazy, because he is way too dangerous to dismiss as just crazy, but he is intense in a really obsessed kind of way.'

'Bingo. That's the weakness we need to exploit. He's obsessed with making these prophecies come true since they will set him as the God he so badly wants to be. So let's feed him something that leads him to act when we want him to act, so that we're ready.'

Narada's eyes lit up as an idea struck him. 'Ganesha, you are a genius if you are thinking what I am thinking.'

Aaditya and Tanya were both a bit uncertain. Ganesha got up abruptly. 'All this thinking has made me really hungry. Get me some sweets and Tanya, you need to pull off the best PR campaign of all time for this plan to work.'

As everyone seemed to get busy, Aaditya wondered how he could make himself useful. Ganesha looked at him, a serious glint in his eyes. 'My boy, I will plot here with Tanya and Narada, but at the end of the day, we will need to take to the skies and smash Kalki's forces into oblivion. This will be a battle unlike any we have seen, so go and get yourself ready.'

***

Two days later, a pastor of a small church in Cincinnati, USA, Baron Waterspoon, announced to a roomful of incredulous reporters that an angel had told him the world was indeed going to end on 21 December 2012. The press had already worked itself up into a frenzy with the date approaching, and religious nuts of all descriptions were crawling out of the woodworks. What made Father Waterspoon's comments more intriguing was that the angel had told him the specific time the world would end: fifty-four minutes after noon on the 21st of December.

That announcement would likely have been forgotten or dismissed as the ravings of a man coming unhinged if at roughly the same time three more press conferences were not being held throughout the world. By a rabbi in Jerusalem, a mullah in Cairo, and a priest at a temple in Benaras in India. Incredibly enough, they all seemed to have the same story, and the same reported time for the impending end of the world.

The first reporters to connect the dots assumed that it was a con job, but the mullah and the priest had never even been on the

Internet, and never travelled outside their home cities, so coordinating such a plan across continents seemed to be a bit of a stretch. As the reports started flooding in the next day, it no longer mattered what the reporters thought. Public imagination, already raised to a fever pitch by the mass hysteria surrounding 2012, lapped the story up. The world was indeed going to end at 12:54 PM EST on the 21st of December, 2012.

The plan that Narada and Tanya had put in place had worked beyond their wildest hopes. Holographic projections had been used to portray a very convincing angel to the priests, then Tanya had used all her contacts and PR skills to ensure that the story had been picked up and reported and blogged on till cyberspace was abuzz with nothing else. Like a pack of dominos, once they had set the ball rolling, the story took on a life of its own. Religious leaders, ordinary people, and even a couple of elderly sheepherders in New Zealand, all came forward saying that they had experienced the same vision.

Now, sitting with the Devas in the conference room, Aaditya wondered if it had been the right thing to do. With the end of the world now seemingly confirmed, anarchists and criminals of all sorts were making hay. Governments around the world were struggling to cope with rioting and looting. Several had already started food rationing and supermarkets were surrounded by armed soldiers with automatic weapons to prevent looting. Aaditya looked at Tanya and knew she was wondering the exact same thing. Brahma must have guessed what several of them were thinking.

'What is happening is unfortunate, but on balance, it is something we have to do. Ganesha is right; we cannot just wait for Kalki to strike at a time of his choosing. Now we know, or at least, we think we have a fair idea, that he will seize upon this hysteria and strike at the time we have dictated.'

'How do we stop him? Do we try and intercept his forces when they're laying the charges?' Aaditya asked.

Indra had been looking intently at a holographic map projected over his palm, and it disappeared as he looked up to reply. 'What we can guess is where he will lay his charges.'

A larger map came up. Several areas were marked in red.

'Brahma, I did the research you'd asked, and these are the largest underwater fault lines on this planet. The Anatolian fault off Turkey, the fault near the Andaman Sea off Sumatra, one off Alaska, one near the Dead Sea and the San Andreas fault off the US West Coast. If Kalki creates quakes and tsunamis at each of these at the same time, we are talking a true global catastrophe. And there's no telling what other quakes or faults may be triggered if all these go off at the same time. Here are our projections of what will follow.'

Aaditya watched in silence as the map showed blue waves of water covering an ever increasing swath of land. When the simulation was over, more than half the landmass in the world was under water.

Shiva sighed.

'Knowing how sick he is, he may just trigger some other faults for sport. The problem, Aadi, is that he probably has the charges in place already, so we can't stop that. We have two options really-nuke the hell out of his base or go in there and stop him.'

Aaditya was about to object when Brahma cut in. 'The morality of killing all those prisoners down there aside, the fact is that to do anything, we need that sphere to emerge from the water, only then can we think of going inside or firing into it.'

They broke the meeting, agreeing to meet later in the evening. Aaditya had felt a surge of confidence when Ganesha had put his plan into motion. For a while it had felt like they had some measure of control over what was going to happen, but he was not so sure any more. They badly needed a plan, and they were fast running out of time.

That evening, Aaditya was at the club, having a Coke with Tanya, and trying to not get too depressed by what was going on in the world. It was a losing battle, as the holographic TV sets floating in the air before them showed that whether or not Kalki ended the world, the human race seemed hell-bent on doing it on its own. Many cities were caught in an orgy of looting. Thinking they had one last chance to settle scores, a number of regional wars had broken out. North Korea had lobbed a few artillery shells into the South, and Iran was reported to be readying its missiles for launch. Al Qaeda suddenly seemed to be on a PR overdrive and had released three videos, all saying that the decadent non-believers were about to die, and those who followed them would get salvation.

Aaditya remembered what Kalki had told him about human powers supporting him after the tsunamis and quakes he planned to unleash, and also the contacts he had seen between the daityas and terrorists in Afghanistan. He began to wonder if all of this was also a part of Kalki's plan and these were pawns he was using to create more chaos and instability.

Durga and Shiva had come by to join them. The Devas looked as sombre as he did.

'Shiva, should we tell the world's governments what's going on?'

'We just debated that with Brahma, and it may actually make things worse.'

Durga explained. 'Most governments and leaders are barely hanging on to sanity, and to some semblance of law and order. If at the last minute, we suddenly pop up and tell them what this is all

about, it won't help. They won't be able to do anything to stop Kalki's plans, but if they lose further grip on the tenuous hold they have, we would just have caused more chaos and lawlessness.'

'But do we have an idea of how we could stop Kalki all by ourselves? There's really no reason for him to get that sphere to the surface unless he feels his base is under attack. Without that, there's no way we could get in. I've seen the number of drones he has. He has few vimanas and Asuras to fly them, but he has so many drones that even if we all went in there, we'd have a tough time breaking through and getting into the base.'

'Aadi, what are you thinking?'

Aaditya looked at Durga. 'I'm thinking that we need a bit of a diversion. Kalki's plan after all is about destroying human civilization as we know it, and I agree we humans can be a painful lot. But since it's our world at stake, let's get some humans to help out, even if they do so for the wrong reasons.'

Shiva and Durga both looked puzzled, but when Aaditya told them what he had in mind, Shiva's face broke out into a broad grin. 'You had been spending way too much time with that son of mine. You're beginning to think like him!'

Shiva spoke softly into his earpiece and within minutes, Ganesha was there.

'Son, I think you and Aadi have some plotting to do. Let me go and ask the others to get ready.'

***

It was the dawn of 20 December 2012. Aaditya had never seen such a large crowd assembled in the main hangar before. All the Devas were there, with Brahma standing on a raised platform as he prepared to address his troops. Shiva and Durga were standing in a corner, watching the proceedings. Indra and Vishnu were near the platform, flanking Brahma. Narada was a few feet from Aaditya, and he saw with surprise that the Deva was carrying a handheld vajra and a long blade at his waist. Narada must have seen his expression.

'This is a fight none of us can be out of.'

Then there were the Ganas, hundreds of them, standing in neat lines, waiting for Shiva to address them. Brahma may be the leader of the Devas, but when it came to the Ganas, they took their orders only from Shiva. They would bear the brunt of the close combat against the daityas when they did manage to get into Kalki's bastion.

Tanya was standing right by his side, with Ganesha a few steps behind them. Aaditya slipped his hand into Tanya's and she gripped it tightly. Even though she and Ganesha would be staying back at the

base, they were going to play a critical and perhaps decisive role in the battle that was about to come.

'Today is a day we had all hoped we would never have to see.'

As Brahma began speaking, everyone, Deva, Gana and human alike, stopped whatever they were doing and listened to him.

'But perhaps this day was inevitable. Inevitable since the first day one of us broke our faith and set out on a path of tyranny.'

Aaditya noted that Brahma did not mention Kalki by name, and wondered just how difficult it had been for the senior Deva to order his forces against his own son.

'You all know what is at stake. Now it is a matter of the very survival of human civilization-a civilization that we were appointed to be guardians of. At various times, all of us have wondered whether they are worth saving at so much risk to ourselves. Perhaps I have too wondered that at times.'

Both Aaditya and Tanya looked up, surprised at his candour. Brahma continued, looking straight at them. 'But the humans are no different from us. Some of them are evil and deceptive, but many, many more have nothing but good in their hearts, nothing more than a desire to leave their world a better place than when they found it. And that is what unites us.

'Many of you have seen battles before, so I will not speak to you of marching into battle with valour, since I know all of you will do that. The only thing I will do is remind you that we cannot fail. If we do, everything we have worked for, everything human civilization has achieved will be washed away by the rage of a mad person, my own son. Today we fly and fight to stop him, to erase forever the shame and pain he has brought to all of us. Today we end this conflict once and for all, so that humans and their planet no longer have to bear the burden of our wrongs. Now, go and fight like there is no tomorrow, because there will not be one if we fail.'

Soon Aaditya was boarding his vimana. He held Tanya, hoping it was not for the last time.

'If it doesn't. .'

Aaditya stopped her. 'We will be together. I promise you, whatever happens out there, I will be back, and we will be with each other."

He kissed her, then, he turned and got into his cockpit. The Devas were all airborne in moments, only Brahma staying back to guide the drones and Ganesha with Tanya to put their own plan in action. The vimanas and drones were to scatter all over the world, so Kalki would not notice a large concentration of forces, and converge and act when the time was right.

With the sun just rising over the Himalayas, Aaditya flew his

vimana to a holding pattern high over the Middle East. At the base, Tanya and Ganesha had started their plan. The first blow was a touch Tanya had suggested. The website of the People Liberation's Army of China showed a series of articles supposedly written by senior generals saying that the end of the world hysteria was being propagated by the Western media as a way of letting the US gain more control over the world. The Chinese authorities tried to take the articles down, but found they could not. The Americans, of course, took immediate notice. Then came articles on websites of leading newspapers about reports from reliable sources of Chinese nuclear submarines leaving their bases a few days ago fully armed with nuclear tipped missiles. Within a couple of hours, the Internet was abuzz with these reports. There was near panic in the US government. Everybody was going slightly crazy with the hysteria around what was likely to happen the next day, but nobody had anticipated that China would choose this moment to try and settle scores.

Official US protests and queries were met with vigorous denials by the Chinese, but in a couple of hours, the US got even stronger confirmation when one of their spy satellites picked up a submarine surfacing briefly no more than five hundred kilometres from the US East Coast. Quick analysis showed it to be a *Jin* class nuclear submarine, with launch tubes for 12 ballistic missiles. If the panicked US authorities thought the Chinese were bluffing, another satellite pass showed one more submarine surfacing near the first sighting. It had been Ganesha playing with the satellite's systems, but to the astonished US operators who saw the pictures, they had no way of knowing otherwise.

The hotlines between the two countries were abuzz but when the US President tried to get through to the Chinese Premier, the line dropped suddenly, courtesy Ganesha's hacking of the computerized system.

It had been a calculated gamble by Ganesha. He wanted the sense of alarm in the US to be enough to generate some action, but at the same time, not so drastic as to trigger actual conflict. As the day wore on, he noted with satisfaction that the plan was working just as he had hoped.

A US carrier battle group with the aircraft carriers *Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln* and eight other ships was steaming at maximum speed towards the last known sighting of the Chinese submarines-less than twenty kilometres from Kalki's base. The US ships would reach there within the next five or six hours. Yet another battle group with another aircraft carrier was headed there, likely reaching there a few hours later.

Aaditya and each of the airborne Devas heard Brahma's voice on

their headsets, updating them on what was happening. 'With such a powerful battle group practically on top of his base, Kalki will have to react. They are looking for submarines and he can't risk his base being discovered. That will give us the opening we need. You know your holding areas, when I give the order, head for Kalki's base.'

The Devas had picked up some powerful allies for the coming battle.

SIXTEEN

The opening salvo in this historic battle turned out to be a stroke of sheer good fortune for the Devas. They had not really counted on the US forces getting dragged into a shooting match with Kalki's forces. Brahma had just hoped that unnerved by the approaching US battle group, Kalki would send out a couple of vimanas to reconnoiter the group, leaving the sphere that carried the vimanas to the surface exposed.

As things turned out, the attack on the Asura main hangar had been successful beyond Aaditya's wildest hopes. It had not only given him the opportunity to escape, but had resulted in the death of at least three Asura pilots. That, coupled with the loss of Maya, had left Kalki with only a handful of Asuras. They were waiting for Kalki's order to launch, while the armies of daityas had been massing in the fields below, waiting to be loaded into transport vimanas to take them to their targets according to Kalki's invasion plans.

Just two hours before the quakes were to be triggered, a US Navy S-3 Viking Anti-submarine aircraft started patrolling the area ahead of the *Lincoln* task force, trying to ferret out the Chinese submarines lurking in the area. The pilot had been deploying dipping sonars to try and get a fix on the submarines and much to Kalki's growing frustration, had been straying closer and closer to his base. He did not worry about his base being detected, located as it was at the bottom of the ocean, but he had to lower the sphere. He wished Maya had still been around. Then Kalki's attention had been diverted by reports of another carrier battle group closing in from the other direction, when a daitya controlling the defenses mounted on the sphere panicked and sent up a single shot. The beam hit the Viking mid-ship, breaking the aircraft into two and sending it crashing into the ocean.

That unleashed a beehive of activity in the US forces. The loss of one of their aircraft led the commander to order the launch of two more anti-submarine aircraft, escorted by F/A-18 fighter escorts, while the two Los Angeles class nuclear submarines accompanying the group now streaked towards the last reported location where the Viking had gone down. With discovery of his troops imminent, Kalki's hand was forced.

What happened next was played out in detail on the screen before Aaditya as his vimana screamed towards Kalki's base. Brahma had informed all the airborne Devas about the latest happenings, and they were now converging on the scene. Aaditya's screen filled with red dots as Kalki launched no less than a dozen drones and at least three

vimanas piloted by Asuras. He watched four green dots representing the US aircraft approaching Kalki's base. The US F/A-18s must have picked up the drones on their radar since they accelerated towards them, trying to protect the slow and lumbering anti-submarine aircraft, while they urgently radioed back to their carrier to ask for reinforcements. They however had no way of picking up the vimanas on their radar, and both fighters fell to a volley of missiles from attackers they did not even know existed. A second later, both Vikings were blotted off Aaditya's display by missiles fired by the drones.

By now, the US fleet commander was apoplectic with rage, having lost five aircraft without even getting the chance to get a shot in. He was bewildered as to where enemy aircraft had just appeared from, seemingly out of the middle of the ocean, but now eliminating this threat was on the top of his mind.

'The drones are cloned on the Sukhoi and the F-22. With their pilots, the US fighters should be able to hold their own against them. But even three vimanas will wipe out a squadron of human fighters without any effort. We need to take out the Asuras first, and then some of us can stay back to help against the drones. The attack team will need to go into Kalki's base as soon as we spot an opening. We have less than an hour to go.'

Indra's plan was sound, though Aaditya knew that many human pilots would surely die, flying into a conflict that they had little idea about. Something struck him. 'Brahma, the moment we enter the fight….'

Brahma anticipated what he was about to say. 'Yes, the moment we enter the fight, our existence ceases to be a secret. Ganesha is already taking care of that. Explanations and introductions can come later, but for now, we just need to ensure that we and the humans do not get in each other's way.'

At that moment, a message of historic proportions suddenly appeared on the command screen of every US warship in the vicinity. 'We are coming to help and are on your side. Do not attempt to fire on us. Your radars will not pick us up, but if any of your pilots sees us, know that we come to fight by your side.'

Aaditya could only wonder what the US officers must have made of this message, but he imagined that they, like him, were too preoccupied with trying to survive the fight than wondering about the implications of the revelation they had just witnessed.

Aaditya was now just a few dozen kilometres away. He watched his display fill with dots as one of the US carriers launched a brace of additional fighters to join the fight and the second carrier launched a squadron of fighters to help out the *Lincoln*. The third carrier was still some distance away, but the US forces were throwing everything they

had into this battle.

Indra had assumed command. Aaditya heard his voice boom over his headset.

'Launch astras!'

More than ten thousand years after they had last clashed on such a scale, an all-out war between the Devas and Asuras had once again erupted. And once again, the fate of mankind hung in the balance.

***

The Devas had closed to no less than fifty kilometres before they fired. Indra had told them they needed to make every shot count and moreover, give Kalki as little warning as possible. Aaditya fired two astras, targeting one of the Asura vimanas that was now rocketing towards the US fighters and he saw blurs of blue on his peripheral vision as the other Devas fired as well. He gnashed his teeth in frustration as the Asura pilot intercepted one of his astras and rolled out the way of the other. However, one Asura had fallen to the first volley as the Devas now joined the drones and remaining Asuras in a swirling, massive dogfight.

Aaditya and the Devas were patched into the American pilots' communication system. Several of them shouted 'Fox 3', as they launched their long-range AMRAAM missiles at the drones that were now rapidly filling up their radar screens. Aaditya heard one or two of them whoop in triumph as a couple of drones disappeared. But they had no idea of the vimanas that were lurking in between the drones, invisible to their radars. He watched the Asuras launch a volley that took down four American fighters. They had to take down the Asura vimanas before they made mincemeat of the American fighters. Aaditya zoomed in closer, seeing a drone come at him from his right. He swiveled his head to lock in on it, and sent a burst from his vajra. The beam caught the Sukhoi drone near its cockpit, and it disintegrated in a flash. Aaditya rolled out of the way of a missile that had been headed his way and when he came upright, he saw that his assailant was now headed straight for him. Good, he wouldn't have to go looking for the Asuras. Now that they knew the Devas had joined the battle, they were making a beeline for the vimanas.

The Asura fired two more missiles, and Aaditya intercepted both with his astras, but did not have time to fire back before the saucer shaped vimana passed him. Aaditya took his vimana through a sharp turn. The Asura was trying to turn towards him so that he could fire again. Aaditya fired an astra at point blank range, watching the saucer as it glowed red-hot for an instant before it disappeared in a flash of intense light.

'There's a saucer on my back. I can't get him off!'

An American pilot was being pursued by an Asura. Aaditya calibrated which fighter had made the emission and took his vimana to the scene of the chase, climbing high so that he could swoop down for his attack pass. He looked down in admiration as the American pilot weaved and turned, avoiding one burst after another from the saucer that was right behind him. As skilled a pilot as he obviously was, Aaditya knew that the American was living on borrowed time unless someone took the vimana off his back.

Aaditya took his vimana into a near vertical dive, focused on nothing else but the red dot he saw on his display. As he got closer, he could see the saucer clearly before him. The Asura at the controls must have been so frustrated by his inability to shoot down this American pilot that he never even knew what hit him. Two astras slammed into him as he and his vimana were vaporized.

Aaditya pulled alongside the F/A-18, slowing down so that the American pilot could see who had just come to his rescue. He gave the pilot a `thumbs up' sign and then peeled off.

This battle was however far from over.

The other Devas had made good progress as well, and the number of red dots on his display had thinned to a handful of drones. There were no Asura vimanas to be seen. Either they were all gone, or else Kalki was holding back the few that he may yet have left.

The Americans were shooting down drones at a steady rate, though Aaditya did see several American fighters go down as well. Shiva and Durga were staying close to Aaditya, but Indra and Vishnu were cutting a swath through the drones.

Another battle was being waged under the seas as well. Two American submarines had tried to penetrate Kalki's base, and Ganesha had already sent all the Devas a message that both had been sunk.

All the Devas now regrouped above the battle. Indra spoke for all of them. 'Kalki will now unleash all his drones. There may be dozens, or even hundreds of them. We will hold them as best as we can. The Americans know they're in an all out war, and they will be getting reinforcements. Aaditya, you know what you have to do when that does happen.'

Aaditya knew only too well. He found his stomach tightening as he contemplated what he had to do soon.

On the ocean surface the familiar sphere was emerging from the water. A gap opened in its surface and drone after drone flew out of it, looking like a swarm of locusts. The Devas wasted no time. Astras slammed into the drones, incinerating many of them before they had even reached level flight. Aaditya fired a couple himself, but then focused on his own mission. As the only one who had been inside

Kalki's lair, it was critical that he make it inside, and find out Kalki's command centre. He dove towards the sphere, drones still emerging from its opening. Shiva was on his right and Durga on his left, sweeping aside any drones that tried to attack him. Narada was right before him. It had been an incredibly risky mission, but Narada had insisted on flying it, arguing he was not as good in aerial combat as the other Devas and wanted to make himself as useful as possible.

Narada fired two astras, destroying a drone at point blank range, but then his vimana seemed to be wobble as beams reached out from the sphere. There was no apparent damage, but Narada's vimana seemed to slow down as the descent into the sphere continued.

Aaditya was now barely a hundred feet above the waves. Narada's vimana took another hit from a beam from the sphere, but he kept on going. The beams from the sphere were now reaching out at Aaditya too, and he flinched at a near miss. He was close enough to see the small gun ports on the sphere's surface that were firing and saw one swivel towards him. He was too close and going too fast to abort his run, so Aaditya prepared himself for the inevitable.

Just then, Narada maneuvered his vimana right in front of Aaditya. The beam from the sphere hit him near his tail, nearly splicing off the vimana into half. Aaditya watched in horror as Narada's vimana spiraled towards the ocean and impacted the water. But the sacrifice had given him the opportunity he needed. He was now headed straight into the opening on the surface of the sphere, which was rapidly filling the screen in front of him. Kalki must have released all his drones; they were now coming out in trickles of one or two. With Aaditya barely fifty feet away, the opening on the sphere begin to slide shut. He willed his vimana to go even faster. Just then a drone shot out. Without conscious thought, Aaditya destroyed it and then flew his vimana straight through the debris.

He felt the pitter-patter of the fragments of the destroyed drone hit his vimana, sounding like a hailstorm. He turned his vimana steeply to one side, and guided it through the opening moments before it slammed shut. Shiva and Durga were right behind him. He could hear Shiva's voice in his ears.

'We made it!'

Aaditya took a deep breath. He accelerated his vimana and shot into the depths of Kalki's base.

***

Aaditya flew into the open fields he had seen before with the gleaming giant pyramid looming in the distance. The only difference was that this time the landscape was not filled with workers tending

to the crops, but an army preparing for invasion. As far as the eye could see, dark shapes of daityas massed around large landing craft. There must have been thousands of them-all awaiting Kalki's order to spearhead his invasion once the tsunamis had hit. Some of them looked up at the three strange vimanas that had suddenly appeared overhead. Aaditya was tempted to fire into their massed ranks or to destroy their hulking landing craft, but this battle depended on their ability to stop Kalki before he detonated his underwater charges. One or two of the daityas took potshots as they passed, but when Shiva fired two astras right into the middle of a large group, incinerating more than twenty of them, the others scattered for cover.

'Follow me!' Aaditya screamed into his headset as his vimana roared towards the hangar opening on the side of the pyramid. There were a few daityas there, but they scrambled away out of sight. It seemed that they had no idea that some attacking vimanas had made it all the way into the innermost recesses of Kalki's base. Aaditya brought his vimana down in a corner of the hangar. Shiva and Durga's vimanas landed close by. As he stepped out, he realized that Kalki had indeed sent out all his drones for the battle that was now raging overhead. There were no drones or vimanas in sight, and any daityas who had been standing guard were nowhere to be seen.

'Now, that wasn't so difficult.'

Shiva had barely spoken when a beam of red light slammed into his vimana, missing his head by inches. The three ran for cover behind Shiva's vimana, their handheld vajras at the ready. Aaditya leaned forward and saw a group of four daityas at the far end of the hangar. Each of them held a long rifle-like weapon and they were firing pretty indiscriminately at the intruders. Aaditya turned to Shiva to see what he was thinking.

'They can't shoot to save their lives, but they don't even need to touch us. If they keep us bottled up here long enough, we've already lost.'

In the chaos and adrenaline rush of the dogfight, Aaditya had almost forgotten just how much of a knife's edge their mission rested on. Each of them had a holographic display over their wrists that showed a timer counting down till the moment when they anticipated Kalki would trigger his explosions.

There were only twenty minutes left.

Aaditya felt Durga come closer to him.

'Which way is Kalki's command centre?'

Two doors lead out of the hangar. One, to the right, almost directly behind the daityas attacking them led to the quarters, where his room had been. The other, to the left, led to a short staircase that ended at the elevator that would take them straight to Kalki's

command centre. Aaditya nodded towards the left.

Before Aaditya could say or do anything to stop her, Durga sprinted out from behind the vimana and ran straight towards the daityas who had been shooting at them. She weaved left and right as beams bounced off the floor and walls all around her and cartwheeled across the floor, landing in a crouch behind a drone engine. The daityas realized too late that she had neatly flanked them, and one of them disappeared in a puff of dust as she fired her first shot. The others took cover and fired back at her.

'Durga, wait!'

He felt Shiva tugging at his arm. 'Come on. She is buying us time. Let's get to Kalki.'

The two of them ran towards the stairs and then into the open elevator. From memory, Aaditya pressed the buttons he had seen Maya pressing. As the elevator climbed up, Aaditya clenched the vajra tightly in his hand, wondering what would greet them once the doors opened.

The doors slid opened and he sensed more than saw two figures outside. He was about to open fire when he saw who stood before him. Bloodied, bruised, and holding the long weapons the daityas brandished, were Leslie and Jim. They seemed just as surprised as he was at seeing them.

'Jesus, Aadi, it is you!'

'Jim, what's going on?'

Jim was about to answer when he suddenly brought his weapon up and took a step back. Shiva had just walked out of the elevator. Aaditya held the barrel of Jim's weapon and pressed it down.

'Relax, he's on our side.'

'Is he one of the Devas you talked about?'

Aaditya just nodded. Leslie quickly told him, 'About an hour ago, all hell broke loose. The daityas were really on edge, and we heard there was an attack of some sort. We had no way of knowing what time it was, but we put two and two together and figured out that today was D-Day. So we thought we'd help out.'

Jim tensed as he heard some movement around the corner and then continued, 'We had spread the word, and everyone knew what was going down. So we fought back. While you were flying around up there, we were taking down their pilots and destroying their planes down here. Some of us were trained to fight, but everyone joined in. Lots of them didn't make it.'

Aaditya saw a look of admiration on Shiva's face.

'That explains why more of their vimanas did not join the fight.'

Aaditya wondered what it must have taken for unarmed civilians to take on daityas. At that moment, he realized what Kalki had never

really understood. As messed up as our world was, and as messed up as humans sometimes seemed to be, there still were a lot of good people out there. People who would sacrifice themselves to help others; people who would give of themselves without asking anything in return; people for whom love and loyalty meant more than power or money. They were people whom Kalki could subjugate and defeat, but never really conquer. People like Leslie, Jim and the other humans who had given their lives today. People like his father.

The thought gave him a renewed resolve as he rushed into the corridor.

'Shiva, Kalki's room is just around the corner, up some stairs!'

He ran towards the corner, only to be slammed against the wall by Jim, just as two beams of light passed, almost grazing his shoulder.

'There are two demons there. They're behind good cover, and we couldn't get past them. Going in there is suicide.'

With less than fifteen minutes left, Aaditya struggled to break out of Jim's grip. Shiva sat down on his haunches next to them, and told Jim and Leslie that Kalki's plan was about to be set into motion. The only way to stop Kalki was to get through the two daityas in the corridor.

Jim and Leslie exchanged a quick glance. Then Jim slapped Aaditya on the shoulder.

'You're a good kid. Your dad would have been real proud.'

And then he and Leslie were gone.

The stepped into the corridor, firing their weapons. None of their shots hit the daityas, who were concealed behind two large barrels. The daityas leaned out and fired. Leslie spiraled in mid stride and fell. Jim ran straight at the daityas, shouting and firing. Then he too went down. Then Aaditya was in the corridor, his vajra held before him. Both daityas had exposed themselves in shooting down Jim and Leslie. Aaditya fired a burst, hitting one of them. Shiva leaped across the corridor and cut him down the other with his trident.

Aaditya entered the command centre. Kalki was there, with no cloak to cover him. His red body was mottled with scars and growths, his wings were spread open behind him, his eyes were ablaze.

He took one look at Aaditya and spat, his spittle sparks of flame that landed just short of Aaditya. Kalki stood up straight, towering over him.

'You are too late.'

SEVENTEEN

'Shiva, my friend, it has been ages since our paths crossed.'

Shiva just leaped towards Kalki, bringing his trident up in a killing blow. Aaditya watched in astonishment as Kalki parried the blow with apparent ease and used one of his wings to literally swat Shiva away. Shiva came up rolling in a crouch, as Kalki advanced on him.

'I did not think I would have the pleasure of crushing you with my own hands. This is indeed a bonus.'

Shiva stood up straight, a blade in his hand. Even his muscled mass was dwarfed by Kalki's fearsome apparition. He gave a quick glance towards Aaditya, and nodded. That was all he had time for before Kalki swung with a curved blade. Shiva stepped out of the way, bringing his own blade up, a blow that Kalki blocked with ease, and their struggle continued. Shiva's signal had been clear enough-he would try and hold Kalki, but now it was up to Aaditya to figure out how to stop Kalki's plan.

Aaditya looked around in panic. What could he do? How could he possibly stop Kalki's plan? The display over his wrist showed that he had now less than five minutes to go before the charges detonated. For an instant, he wondered if Kalki had already detonated the charges, and their assault had been in vain, but then he spotted a bank of monitors in a corner showing feeds from several news channels. Kalki must have tuned into them to see the reaction to the havoc he planned to wreak. None of them mentioned anything about quakes or tsunamis. So he still had time. He sat down in the large chair in the middle of the room and looked at a display on its armrest. It was counting down. A light below it glowed green. Aaditya tried to calm his mind, which was almost impossible to do, with the rising panic and the sounds of the life and death struggle between Shiva and Kalki behind him. He wondered if Kalki's systems worked like those of the Devas, which was a safe bet since he essentially had been one of them.

'Send up the sphere and open it for incoming craft.'

He watched with relief as he got an acknowledgement. Now the other Devas and the Ganas could come in. All he needed to do now was to terminate the explosions that Kalki had planned.

'What is the status of the charges?'

A holographic screen appeared over his right armrest. It had a simple message. 'All charges armed. Four minutes to detonation.'

'Abort. Repeat, abort.'

The message just stayed the way it was.

'Cancel. Terminate.'

He kept trying, but nothing seemed to work.

Aaditya was now on the verge of tears. Tears of panic and sheer terror. He could not have come so far only to watch helplessly as the world was destroyed before his eyes. He felt strong arms grab him from behind and lift him in the air. He struggled in vain as he was turned around like a doll and found himself face to face with Kalki.

He looked around. Shiva lay slumped in a corner of the room. Kalki brought his face close and Aaditya recoiled at the stench. It was the smell of death and decay-of dead mice, rotten food, of the fate that Kalki had in mind for all of mankind.

'I have waited thousands of years for this moment. Who are you to stop me? A mere boy? A cripple. You could have been on my side, now you can only watch as my rule on Earth begins.'

Aaditya felt his hair being singed from the flame that was in Kalki's eyes. He had spotted what was in Aaditya's pocket. The lucky patch. Kalki snorted dismissively as he took it out, still holding Aaditya in the air effortlessly with one hand.

'A pathetic token to remind you of a pathetic man. Fear not, you will soon join your father.'

Kalki spat on the patch, and it burst into flames, its ashes crumbling to the ground at Kalki's feet. Still dangling in the air, Aaditya saw a plug in Kalki's right ear and wondered if the thought controls worked the same way as for the Devas. It was a gamble, but it was the last chance he had. The problem was that he had no way of pulling the plug out. He could barely move.

Kalki opened his mouth, just inches from Aaditya's face. Inside, a fireball was forming.

Then, suddenly, Kalki's eyes widened and his grip came loose. Shiva's trident was impaled on Kalki's thigh. Shiva was at Kalki's feet, bringing his blade down for another strike. It gave Aaditya the time he needed. He reached out and pulled the plug out of Kalki's ear. Shiva's blade connected and Kalki dropped Aaditya, the plug falling a couple of feet away from him.

Kalki kicked Shiva away and advanced on Aaditya. Only twenty seconds were left till the charges detonated. Aaditya crawled towards the plug, but felt Kalki's grip on his right leg. Kalki began pulling Aaditya towards him, screaming in rage.

'I will burn you limb by limb!'

Aaditya's hand was just inches from the plug, but he was being pulled back, unable to resist Kalki's strength.

'Maybe I'll just burn your other leg and your arms so you can live like a cripple!'

Aaditya reached down to his right thigh and felt for the catch

there. As Kalki roared in anger with Aaditya's prosthetic leg in his hand, Aaditya picked up the plug and put it into his ear. There was a flash of blinding pain. When he opened his eyes he saw Kalki leaping towards him, talons bared, his wings spread, like a predatory bird about to pounce on its prey.

Seven seconds left.

There was just enough time to still his mind and give the command to stop the detonations. Kalki must have known what he had done because he screamed as he bore down on Aaditya, determined to rip him to shreds and then detonate the charges again.

Aaditya closed his eyes, but Kalki never landed. He felt a gust of wind and heard a thud. When he opened his eyes, Kalki was in a corner of the room, his left wing sheared off in half. At the doorway was Vishnu, his hand held out to recover the discus that had just done the damage. Behind him were Indra and Durga. Kalki looked at them calmly.

'My war is not over. It never will be.'

He spat out a huge fireball into the middle of the room that blinded everyone for an instant. And then, Kalki was gone.

Everyone's eyes turned to a CNN news report on one of the monitors in the room. It showed thousands of people gathered at Times Square in New York. There were similar groups throughout the world, many praying, others crying, all waiting for what they had come to believe was going to be the end of the world. Aaditya could hear the newscaster speaking, a sarcastic smile on her face.

'For those of you joining us at this hour, it is 12:55 Eastern Standard Time on the 21st of December, 2012, and as far as I can tell, the world has not ended. Please stand by for the Sports News.'

***

The relief and joy of the victory had soon given way to several uncomfortable questions. What had happened to Kalki? Nobody seemed to know for sure, but the golden capstone that had stood on top of his pyramid was missing. It was assumed that it had been some kind of vimana in which Kalki had escaped. Badly wounded, without his weapons or his army, Kalki was little immediate threat, but the very fact that he was unaccounted for meant that his dark shadow had not been banished forever. The battle had also ripped away the veil of secrecy that the Devas had surrounded themselves with. For the first time in tens of thousands of years, humans were aware they shared their planet with beings from another world. The Americans had guessed as much as they went about the frenetic battle over the ocean. When one of their helicopters picked up Narada, who had been found

afloat in the water, they got a chance to see them up close. It was reported that the first words spoken between them and the Devas, was, 'I'll be damned. ET looks like an old rock star.'

The next few days were filled with frenetic activity, Aaditya learning of most of the happenings from reports back in Kongka La, where he spent every minute possible with Tanya. If any doubts had remained about the truth of their story, the Devas dispelled them by bringing up the humans who had been kept as slaves in Kalki's base and handing them back to their respective governments. They then took some representatives of the world's leading powers to the sites where Kalki had laid the charges, and true enough, they found thermonuclear weapons embedded deep in the fault lines. There was a tricky issue of what to do with the hundreds of daityas who had been taken captive, and Brahma finally ordered that they be resettled in a heavily guarded camp in a remote area of Antarctica, where they would be under constant surveillance by the Devas.

It was a lot for human governments to deal with over just a few days, as they digested the full magnitude of the events and also how close the planet had come to a true apocalypse. Narada had started working on a plan on how best to communicate this to the masses, with Brahma deciding that there were now too many people who knew the truth-pilots, government agencies, the freed human prisoners-for their existence to be kept a secret.

But for now, none of that mattered to Aaditya. The only thing that mattered to him was that he could feel Tanya close to him, holding his hand tight as they sat in a movie theatre watching the latest Bollywood potboiler. It was a spectacularly bad movie, but that was hardly the point. The point was that he had just spent his first day with Tanya back among humans. They had been dropped off by Shiva near Delhi, and they had spent the whole day shopping, eating out, watching people, and most importantly, reveling in each other's company.

There were so many things they needed to figure out. Where would they stay? Brahma had told them that they were welcome to stay at Kongka La as long as they wanted, but with the Devas' existence no longer a secret, Tanya's heart was in making a fresh beginning. There was also the question of what they would do next. Would he go back to college? With all that he had been through, could he really go back to the life he once had? Having tasted what it meant to be a pilot, could he live with never soaring through the skies in a vimana again? At least he wouldn't have to worry about money. Narada had told him that the money that Kalki had transferred to his account was all his to keep.

Aaditya's mind told him that he should worry about at least some

of those things. But his heart told him that as long as he was with Tanya, they would somehow figure things out.

After the movie, as they walked out into the street, they looked at the stars in the night sky above.

'Tanya.'

'Yes.'

He brought his hand up to caress her left cheek.

'Happy New Year, sweetheart. This will be the first year of the rest of our lives-together.'

He kissed her as fireworks streaked across the night sky.

***

On 1 January 2013, New York was getting ready for an extraordinary meeting at the United Nations. The leaders of all the world's countries were there, as were representatives of almost every major newspaper and TV channel. The proceedings were to be broadcast live to every home in the world. For the last week or so, many people had been increasingly getting an idea that something quite out of the ordinary was about to happen. There had been leaked news reports, interviews with US pilots who spoke on condition of anonymity about a bizarre battle over the Bermuda Triangle, accounts posted online by hundreds of people who spoke of having been rescued from an alien demon's underwater base. And above all, reports that hinted at the fact that far from being alone in the universe, humans were not alone on Earth. Intelligent beings from another world had been sharing the world with them for millennia. All of this had been a carefully orchestrated plan by Narada, to try and ease the shock people would feel when the Devas finally revealed themselves.

But nothing he could have done would have prepared them for the sight of a half dozen strange looking craft suddenly materializing in the skies over New York. Someone mentioned the word *vimana* and the press jumped on it. Anybody in the world who had access to a TV was now watching these mysterious craft as they descended over New York City into a specially blocked off area where no cameras or people other than a few officials with top secret clearance were allowed.

The session was opened by the UN Secretary General. He spoke eloquently about what a historic day this was, about how the greatest question of all time had finally been answered. About how close man had come to losing everything that was cherished, but had prevailed thanks to the help of the beings who had remained shrouded in the mists of myth and legend. As well as he spoke, nobody really wanted to hear what he had to say. They wanted to know who these

mysterious aliens were. There was almost a palpable sigh of disappointment when a dignified looking old man, more like a college professor than an alien from outer space, took the podium.

Aaditya and Tanya gripped each other's hands, watching the live telecast on the TV. They realized that they were witnessing a moment that would change everything; just as the incidents of the last few months had changed their lives.

Brahma looked at the delegates crowding the room, at the cameras that ringed the podium where he stood. He smiled, and Aaditya wondered what it must be like to finally deliver a speech at least 15,000 years in the making.

'People of Earth,' he began.

A pin-drop silence enveloped the room.

'My name is Brahma.'